Lessons of the 1935 Programme for France by Phil Sharpe

The first part of Trotsky’s programme for France is the article: ‘Wither France’. (1) Trotsky is concerned to develop a strategy that will undermine the attempt of the Fascists to seize political power. He outlines how the beginning of the struggle against the Fascists involves the formation of armed militias that can engage in physical confrontation and so generate confidence within the working class that action is being taken to undermine the strength of Fascism. His arguments in favour of the formation of a workers militia in order to oppose Fascism and advance the interests of the working class in 1930’s France are timely. However do they apply to a situation in which the threat of Fascist reaction is less urgent and the working class is opposed to the prospect of violence in order to further political aims? Trotsky argues: “The duty of a revolutionary party is to foresee in time the inescapability of the transformation of politics into open armed conflict, and with all its forces to prepare for that moment just as the ruling class is preparing.”(2) The strategic conclusion of this perspective is that the revolution will be violent: “Every revolution is prepared by the march of economic and political development, but it is always decided by open conflict between hostile classes. A revolutionary victory can become possible only as a result of long political agitation, a lengthy period of education and organization of the masses. But the armed conflict must likewise be prepared long in advance.”(3)

This view seems to be self-explanatory. The state remains an instrument of coercion and against any expression of opposition to the capitalist system. Social reality continually generates violent conflict, and the conclusion that can be made from this situation is that the superior exercise of violent will result in political success. In this context it seems logical and inevitable that the development of class struggle will ultimately result in civil war. Hence the principled task of the revolutionary party is to prepare the working class for violent conflict if the aim of the overthrow of capitalism is to be achieved. However, what this reasoning does not allow for in relation to the present situation is the prevailing mood of the working class and most progressive people because they reject the role of violence in relation to the realisation of the aims of political activity. Only the intense application of militaristic propaganda makes the various wars of imperialism acceptable to working people. Furthermore the most popular sentiment in relation to these wars is regret and sadness in relation to the loss of human life. The armed forces are popular precisely because army personnel are killed in the carrying out of their duty for the nation and state. Therefore it is unlikely that political parties will be popular if they are considered to have rejected the democratic process as the means for realising political success and instead consider that violence is part of their strategy. Thus the approach of Trotsky seems to have become antiquated. The following view seems very old-fashioned: “It is enough that the proletariat should want arms – and it will find them. The task of the revolutionary party is to awaken this desire and to facilitate its realization.”(4) This aim is anachronistic because the continual succession of wars and violence within society has promoted the popular view that civilised human behaviour is based upon the role of peace. Conflict should be resolved by negotiation and compromise as occurred in relation to the situation in Northern Ireland. Hence violence is associated with terrorism and wars against terrorism. This may be a one-sided view that does not explain adequately the domination of imperialism, but it is popular viewpoint. Revolutionary Marxism will not become influential by the open advocacy of armed conflict in this situation. Recognition of the opposition to political violence is effectively understood if not theorised by many of the Marxist groups.

Trotsky would reply to this argument and suggest that parties committed to reformism and parliamentary democracy have been unable to effectively oppose fascism and capitalism. He would also argue that the ultimate outcome of the intensification of the class struggle is civil war. We cannot refute these observations in relation to many of the empirical events of the class struggle. Many strikes have also had violent aspects as in relation to the British miner’s strike of 1984-85. However this understanding of Trotsky was still secondary to his recognition that a real and genuine united front of the Socialist and Communist parties in France was a primary basis to defeat Fascism. This meant that what was primary for success was the development of the unity of political parties that were dedicated to the realisation of a workers government and the defeat of fascism and capitalism. In this context the role of the workers militia becomes a secondary if still integral aspect of the programme for the mobilisation of the working class. What is most important is the role of the general strike that poses the issue about which class rules society. However, the most problematical aspect of the actually constituted united front in France was its passivity and failure to mobilise according to a programme of class struggle. In contrast the participation of working people according to a platform of mass struggle would pose the issue of power. The implied suggestion is that the more militant the activity of the working class the less likely was the necessity for the actions of the workers militia. Instead the working class could acquire power peacefully via the success of the general strike. Consequently Trotsky’s argument about the importance of the workers militia becomes one of potentialities rather than an actuality, and the role of violence becomes exceptional and not a logical aspect of the intensification of the class struggle. In contrast the equivocation and passivity of the united front parties would encourage the violence of the Fascist organisations and ruling class. In order to undermine this prospect of violence it would be the threat of violence based on the organisation of armed militias that would be essential. The mobilisation of the militant working class would be sufficient to undermine the realisation of violence if this mass struggle was consciously dedicated to the task of obtaining political power. Hence the more revolutionary the struggle the less likely is the outbreak of violence.

It could be argued that even the potential formation of workers militias would be rejected as a result of the pacifist moods of the contemporary working class. This is possible but if Marxism openly advocates the role of the armed militia within the context of the interests of the class struggle these objections could be overcome. The point is that Marxism and the working class shares the concern that the mass struggle should remain peaceful and that revolutionary objectives should be realised without resort to violence. This possibility will be advanced if the mass struggle achieves a high level of consciousness that its aims can only be achieved by a process of the overthrow of capitalism. Hence the role of the general strike will be to realise the demise of the hegemony of capital and bring about a workers government. In this context the role of the workers militia will be to act as a supplemental power to the other organisations of the working class, but the actual power of the workers militia will not be exercised. Instead the factory committees of the working class will be the most dynamic elements of the revolutionary process. In other words, as Trotsky argues, it is still an abdication of responsibility for Marxists to reject the role of the armed militia. But we should also suggest that the consciousness and militancy of the class struggle expresses the possibility to resolve the class struggle successfully in a peaceful manner. In contrast indecision and the failure to build a militant movement of mass struggle is more likely to create a climate in which violence occurs. Only the commitment of parties to a revolutionary perspective would undermine the prospect of violence. Thus it is the unprincipled combination of reformism and pacifism that is likely to encourage violence and undermine the success of the class struggle. This is why we should not discourage the working class in relation to its revulsion of violence but the standpoint of pacifism should be opposed if the perspective of the peaceful realisation of socialism is to be upheld rather than undermined.

Trotsky discusses the character of the economic and political situation in mid 1930’s France. He disagrees with the Comintern that defines the nature of the period as being non-revolutionary. He argues: “We submit: the diagnosis of the Comintern is entirely false. The situation is revolutionary, as revolutionary as it can be, granted the non-revolutionary policies of the working class parties. More exactly, the situation is prerevolutionary. In order to bring the situation to it full maturity, there must be an immediate, vigorous, unremitting mobilization of the masses, under the slogan of the conquest of power in the name of socialism. This is the only way through which the prerevolutionary situation will be changed into a revolutionary situation. On the other hand, if we continue to mark time, the prerevolutionary situation will inevitably be changed into one of counterrevolution, and will bring on the victory of fascism.”(5) This view does describe the situation in France of the mid 1930’s when the working class was spontaneously in favour of militant action that posed important questions about which class should rule society. However the present situation is non-revolutionary. Hence the central task is to understand what this means and to develop a perspective that attempts to overcome the present defensive situation in order to promote the offensive for socialism. But we cannot achieve this goal if we attempt to leap over the implications of the non-revolutionary situation. Instead we need to carry out modest tasks that enable the political and organisational mobilisation of party and class to take place.

The fault of the Socialist and Communist parties in the 1930’s was that they had a standpoint that was based on limiting the militancy and ambition of the spontaneous activity of the working class. Therefore it was obvious to Trotsky that the only strategy that was principled was one that was based on the struggle for political power, or the transformation of the prerevolutionary situation into a condition with revolutionary possibilities. The very character of the actions of the working class defined these possibilities. Hence the dynamics of the class struggle indicated that it represented immense potential for revolutionary transformation and the potential for the task of the realisation of the direct seizure of power. But in the present period we have more modest tasks such as the promotion of the idea of the importance of mass struggle against the austerity policy within the EU. Only in a contradictory manner has this militant struggle taken place in Greece. The argument in favour of militancy has to take place before mass struggle will occur. Instead of carrying out this task the various Marxist forces abstain from the required political activity and instead discover excuses as to why the development of a mass movement against austerity has not occurred.

Trotsky can effectively dismiss the importance of political activity in a non-revolutionary period because the tempo of the class struggle in the 1930’s did pose the strategic question of how to transform a pre-revolutionary situation into the revolutionary struggle for political power. Hence the task in France was to develop a strategy that was compatible with the dynamics of mass struggle and therefore did not lag behind the social power of the mass movement. In contrast the anti-fascism of the Socialist and Communist Parties was limited to the realisation of parliamentary power and so was not related to the potential of the radicalisation of the working class. The working class spontaneously strove for socialism whilst the political parties were restricted to the goal of bourgeois democracy. In the present period the demoralisation of class and Marxist parties means that the austerity plans are being implemented without resistance. Marxism has nothing substantial to say to the class about the importance of opposing the austerity. In other words there is no strategy that would enhance the prospect of realising a pre-revolutionary situation. Instead the Marxist Left is obsessed by the implications of the falling rate of profit because they have replaced emphasis on conscious class struggle with automatic schemas about the crisis of capitalism. The Left relies on the economic situation for resolving the crucial political questions about how to mobilise the working class against the austerity policy. Trotsky accepts that the economic situation of increasing crisis between the productive forces and the relations of production is crucial for the possibility of transition to socialism. But he also contends: “The fundamental premise of socialism – that is, the economic premise – has already been present for some time. But capitalism will not disappear from the scene automatically. Only the working class can seize the forces of production from the stranglehold of the exploiters. History places this task squarely before us. If the proletariat is, for one reason or another, incapable of routing the bourgeoisie and of seizing power – if it is, for example, paralyzed by its own parties and trade unions – the continued decay of economy and civilization will follow, calamities will pile up, despair and prostration will engulf the masses, and capitalism – decrepit, decayed and rotting – will strangle the people with increasing strength, and will thrust them into the abyss of a new war. Other than socialist revolution, there is no way out.”(6)

In general terms the present situation has confirmed the standpoint of Trotsky. Only the conscious development of class struggle can create the conditions for the transformation of society. We cannot rely on the economic situation mechanically creating the possibility for socialism. Instead there is no alternative than that of Marxism attempting to develop support within the working class on the basis of a strategy that advocates the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism in a situation of crisis. Only the conscious support of the class for this strategy will enhance the prospect for the transformation of society. But this is not the lesson learnt by the various Marxist groups. Instead of attempting to engage with the class about the importance of strategy in relation to the task of opposing the austerity policy they are obsessed about the significance of the falling rate of profit. In an alienating manner this becomes an agency of class struggle and so replaces the difficult task of developing support within the class for a strategy of opposition to capitalism. What is ignored by this attitude is Trotsky’s recognition that only the working class can change society. If the working class – for whatever reason – is sceptical about the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society, then the overthrow of capitalism will not occur. Consequently, the role of the party is to generate confidence in the class that it can succeed in the task of bringing about the demise of capitalism. However the party will only engage in this process of interaction with the class if it is aware of the revolutionary importance of this strategy. The reason that the Marxist groups fail to interact with the class is because they no longer believe in the importance of class struggle as the only basis of social change. The reliance on economic determinism for promoting the prospect of socialism means that the Left has a pretext to effectively reject its primary task of attempting to develop support within the working class for socialist revolution. What results from this situation are low levels of class consciousness, and the demoralisation of the various Marxist organisations.

This situation is related to the prevailing emphasis on discussion about the seriousness of the present crisis which results in the tentative suggestion that what is occurring is in some sense a final crisis. Trotsky argued that this view is nonsense, and is adamant that capitalism will continue to have periods of expansion and boom combined with cyclical crisis until it is overthrown. But he issues a warning – that is not being heeded by the Marxist left – that society continues to disintegrate in relation to the continuous seriousness of crisis: “This optimistic fatalism, which seemed convincing for a quarter of a century, today resounds like a voice from the grave. It is a radically false idea that in going towards the future crisis the proletariat will inevitably become more powerful than at present. With the further inevitable decay of capitalism, the proletariat will not grow and reinforce itself but will decompose, constantly increasing the army of the unemployed and slum proletariat. The petty bourgeoisie, meanwhile, will be declassed and sink into despair. Loss of time holds out the prospect of fascism and not of proletarian revolution.”(7) What Trotsky is emphasising is that we have limited time for the prospect of the success of proletarian revolution before crisis results in the prevailing influence of barbarism. This can be indicated by the continuation of world poverty, corruption, violence, and the manifestation of the decline of the cohesion of the international working class. But the false optimism of economic determinism is complacent about this situation and instead can only be complacent about the prospects for change. What is ignored is the importance of the level of class consciousness and the crisis of the various Marxist organisations. The point is that crisis cannot be an agency of change unless it is reflected dynamically in the growth of the determination of the class to act to bring about the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. This possibility will not occur automatically because of the crisis and is instead a process that is based on the increasing confidence of the proletariat in effectiveness of the methods of class struggle. Hence a revolutionary situation can only be realised by the development of the class struggle, but if the Marxist parties reject these revolutionary tasks the possibilities for progress in the class struggle will be undermined. This situation is what characterises the present period. In other words we cannot predict that revolutionary developments will be the rigid outcome of the economic crisis. But what we do know is that if the Marxist groups become sceptical about the possibility for progress in the class struggle, and instead rely on the historical process, via the role of crisis, for generating the prospect of socialism, then it will be extremely difficult to promote the development of a revolutionary situation. Instead the Marxist groups project their historical scepticism onto the proletariat which results in the intensification of the mood of demoralisation. The approach of Trotsky is rejected which is that Marxism should act to promote rather than place limitations on the development of the class struggle.

Trotsky would also suggest that the present scepticism of the Marxist left about the prospects of the class struggle ignores the possible fluidity of the situation: “But the most striking features of our epoch of capitalism in decay are immediate and transitional: situations between the non-revolutionary and pre-revolutionary, between the prerevolutionary and the revolutionary or…the counterrevolutionary. It is precisely these transitional stages that have decisive importance from the point of view of political strategy.”(8) The present effective pessimism of the Marxist left is because they have a strategic crisis; they do not recognise how and why the contemporary non-revolutionary situation could undergo progression to higher stages in the class struggle. Hence they do not understand how quickly the development of a mass movement of opposition to the austerity policy could transform the situation and bring about a pre-revolutionary situation. The point is that the crisis has undermined the material interests of the working class and so challenged the legitimacy of the capitalism system. What results is mass discontent. Only the ideology of the ruling class, and the attitude of the various parties and trade unions, restricts the possibility to develop a mass movement. With a principled strategy this situation could be transformed and the conservative attitudes of parties and class overcome. The result is progress in the class struggle and the possibility that higher forms of class struggle that pose the prospect of power can be attained. But we will not be able to realise this process of advance if the present demoralisation of parties and class continue. Instead the result is acceptance of the austerity policy of the ruling class. This is why strategy is so crucial in order to overcome the impasses imposed by the attitudes of scepticism and demoralisation. The principled character of strategy is based on the recognition of the dynamic advance that can be the result of the creation of a mass movement that is opposed to the austerity policy and is increasing critical of capitalism. In contrast the present situation is non-revolutionary because of the low level of class consciousness and its negative effects on the possibility of militant struggle. What Trotsky suggests is that with the combination of coherent and principled strategy, and the development of class confidence, the potential to go from a non-revolutionary situation to higher forms of the class struggle is tremendously enhanced.

However, the opposite of regression is also possible if the supposedly revolutionary party does not recognise the potential for the generation of a revolutionary situation: “A revolutionary situation develops out of the reciprocal action of objective and subjective factors. If the party of the proletariat is incapable of analyzing the tendencies of the prerevolutionary situation in time, we shall inevitably have a counterrevolutionary situation.”(9) This regressive process is what is happening at present. The various Marxist organisations have refused to consider that in a situation of crisis the non-revolutionary condition can be transformed into a pre-revolutionary one via the development of mass struggle against the austerity policy. Instead they have adapted to the mood of demoralisation within the working class. But the situation does not stay static because the outcome of this demoralisation is increasing mass support for right wing formations and the growth of anti-EU chauvinism. Hence what is occurring is a counterrevolutionary process that promotes the rise of reaction. This means it is the duty of Marxist organisations to recognise that in a period of crisis the task is to develop support for a revolutionary offensive. What is required is the generation of support for a strategy with a revolutionary perspective. This is the only basis to facilitate progress in the class struggle and overcome the regressive tendencies towards the creation of a counterrevolutionary situation.

But presently we do have to address the fact that we are in a non-revolutionary situation. This raises the question of the validity of immediate demands. In other words what are required are defensive demands that enable us if realised to advance to higher forms of the class struggle. Trotsky rejects the importance of immediate demands because he argues that in a period of crisis what is required is the advocacy of demands that enable us to go onto the offensive. This means that modest and trade union type demands are both limited and ineffective: “However, every worker knows that with two million partially or wholly unemployed, the ordinary trade union struggle for collective bargaining is utopian. Under present conditions, in order to force the capitalists to make important concessions, we must break their wills; this can be done only by a revolutionary offensive. But a revolutionary offensive, which opposes one class to another, cannot be developed solely under slogans of partial economic demands.”(10) This standpoint is illogical. How is it possible to develop a revolutionary offensive if it is not practical to generate action in relation to immediate demands like the struggle for higher wages? Surely the very successful action that could be taken to obtain higher wages would become the prelude for struggle on the basis of more advanced transitional demands? One of the reasons that the struggle against austerity has not taken place is because of the lack of on-going trade union action around issues of collective bargaining and health and safety. If systematic activity occurred on these issues it would then encourage the development of the struggle against austerity and so raise the prospect of a general strike against the policy of the EU. In contrast Trotsky is suggesting that we should effectively ignore or ‘leap over’ the stage of immediate demands because they cannot be realised in a period of crisis, and instead we should attempt to promote the more ambitious transitional demands of a revolutionary offensive. This is ultra-leftism because this strategy does not allow for the period of preparation and successful struggle around immediate demands that must occur in order for the prospect of mobilising for transitional demands to take place. It is not possible to by-pass the period of mobilisation around limited demands even if they do become more difficult to realise in periods of crisis. For the point is that the very mobilisation concerning immediate demands will enhance the confidence of the working class to engage in more ambitious struggles. The result will be invaluable experience that must occur if this period of lower forms of class struggle is to become transformed into higher forms that express mobilisation around transitional demands and the prospect of a revolutionary offensive. In this context the Comintern is not being unprincipled to raise the importance of immediate demands. What is unprincipled is that this emphasis becomes the basis to reject the significance of struggles for transitional demands at a future moment in time.

The standpoint of Trotsky was based on the situation in France that recognised that the working class was indifferent to the call to engage in limited economic disputes and yet was ready to engage in a general strike against Fascism. However the point is that this development may have explained the events in France, and indicates working class concern about the influence of Fascism, but it cannot be applied to explain all situations in the class struggle: “The masses understand or feel that, under the conditions of the crisis and of unemployment, partial economic conflicts require unheard of sacrifices which will never be justified in any case by the results obtained. The masses wait for and demand other and more efficacious methods. Messrs. Strategists, learn from the masses: they are guided by a sure and revolutionary instinct.”(11) However this viewpoint is dogmatic if applied to the present situation. The very inability to successfully defend past gains has undermined the sense of confidence that is required in order to strive for more ambitious demands. Hence it could be argued that success in relation to issues like collective bargaining would promote the prospect of more ambitious struggle against the austerity policy. In this context struggles against redundancies in the public sector would generate the confidence required to oppose the austerity policy in general. Hence it has been the inability to realise immediate demands that has undermined the prospect to develop mass struggle around more ambitious aims of a transitional character.

The present situation is different to mid 1930’s France where the radicalised working class was increasingly striving towards the ultimate aim of the seizure of power. In contrast we have a non-revolutionary situation which is related to a legacy of defeats in the class struggle. Therefore success in relation to immediate demands can only be of benefit in relation to promoting the prospect of developing class struggle in more advanced terms. Consequently the task of Marxism is to connect a programme of immediate demands with the perspective of the socialist offensive that would be based on the role of transitional demands. The struggle against austerity would connect partial and transitional demands in that the role of defensive struggle would be connected to the strategic importance of the generation of the socialist offensive. In this context Trotsky’s dismissal of immediate demands is ultimatist and a dogmatic rejection of what is possible in the precise circumstances of the class struggle. Lenin always argued that we have to recognise the tasks at each particular situation in the class struggle, but Trotsky’s arguments against the importance of immediate demands expresses a subjective aspiration to ‘leap over’ over what is important at a given stage of the class struggle. We cannot generate a revolutionary offensive without initially completing defensive tasks. Trotsky’s arguments in favour of the revolutionary offensive in the mid 1930’s are valid for their time because the tasks of the class struggle were not primarily of a defensive character. Thus the question of the defeat of fascism is connected to the aim of realising the political power of the proletariat. In contrast we presently have defensive tasks because the task of constructing a mass movement against the austerity policy has not yet begun. The successful realisation of defensive tasks in connection to the role of immediate demands will enable the development of mass activity against the austerity policy.

 Trotsky extends his argument in order to suggest that even the successful realisation of immediate demands is inadequate in the situation of economic crisis: “However, even the greatest “concessions” that contemporary capitalism (itself in a blind alley) is capable of are completely insignificant in comparison with the misery of the masses and the depth of the social crisis. This is why the most immediate of all demands must be for the expropriation of the capitalists and the nationalization (socialization) of the means of production. But is not this demand unrealizable under the rule of the bourgeoisie? Quite so! That is why we must seize power.”(12) This comment is an emphatic rejection of the importance of immediate demands as being inadequate in a period of economic crisis. This may be true to the extent that the immediate demands may aim for a modest wage increase that does not overcome the threat of imminent unemployment, but what Trotsky does not seem to have recognised is that the very success of the workers who have obtained these small economic gains is to increase morale and levels of class consciousness. The result of these gains is that the working class becomes better prepared to fight for more ambitious demands including the nationalisation of the economy. Consequently we cannot reject in absolute terms the importance of immediate demands and instead should recognise their political significance even in times of acute economic crisis.

In other words we should understand that the struggle for immediate demands can become a prelude to mobilisation on the basis of transitional demands. In contrast Trotsky seems to create a barrier between immediate demands and transitional demands. Ultimately the logic of his rigid position is to contend that the only demand that is principled is that which explicitly calls for the overthrow of the capitalist system. This means that his starting point of analysis is not the everyday needs of the working class and instead he assumes the vantage point of the Marxist theoretician who is already convinced of the necessity to overthrow capitalism. To Trotsky economic demands may be modest, but we can recognise their importance in terms of the promotion of the organisation and class cohesion of the workers. In most situations we cannot advance to the stage of the advocacy of transitional demands without the successful struggle to realise immediate demands. In present terms the very legacy of the defeats of the working class has undermined the prospect of movement from immediate struggle to conflicts with a transitional character. The very victories of immediate demands would generate support for aims with a transitional character.

Trotsky outlines how the very character of economic crisis undermines the role of struggle around immediate demands: “On the purely economic level, the working class is thrown into a disorderly retreat by the terrific pressure of the economic catastrophe. On the other hand, the decline of capitalism, with all its weight, pushes the proletariat on the road towards the revolutionary mass struggle for political power. However the leadership of the Communist Party tries with all its force to bar this road. Thus in the hands of the Stalinists the program of “immediate demands” becomes an instrument for the disorientation and disorganization of the proletariat. But a political offensive (a struggle for power) with an active defence – army (militia) would at once alter the relationship of class forces and would at the same time, even for the most backward elements of the working class, open up the possibility for a victorious economic struggle.”(13) This view is like having a piece of cake and eating it. The illogical suggestion is that if we do not have a perspective of struggle for immediate demands we will still realise these demands by the utilisation of the method of revolutionary class struggle. Why struggle for immediate demands in the first place because what is preferable is that we should reject this approach and instead directly aim to obtain political power? What is not recognised by this inconsistent view is that in order to begin the struggle in a situation of economic crisis with the threat of unemployment and poverty it is necessary to struggle to protect jobs and fight for wage increases. The situation may make this task difficult but success in these modest terms improves the class confidence of the proletariat. Consequently the class becomes more receptive to struggle on a programme that represents more ambitious demands and which more closely corresponds to the situation of economic crisis. But a class that has immense difficulty in realising immediate demands will not be receptive to the struggle to resolve the economic crisis in a revolutionary manner. However success in relation to defensive tasks, and on the basis of immediate demands, prepares the prospect of a revolutionary offensive. Victory in relation to defensive tasks opens up the possibility of mobilisation for the revolutionary offensive. It is dogmatic for Trotsky to predict that victory in economic struggles is limited to periods of boom. Instead of this inflexibility it is necessary to articulate a programme that can unify the tasks of defensive struggle with the aims of a socialist offensive. Instead Trotsky has the attitude that the economic crisis and the threat of fascism means that the only valid perspective is that of the revolutionary offensive. This standpoint is as one-sided as the Communist Party’s view that argues we are in a non-revolutionary period of class struggle despite the spontaneous mobilisations of the working class in favour of revolutionary demands.

In the last analysis Trotsky’s perspective is inconsistent because despite arguing that the only principled approach is that of the revolutionary offensive he also grudgingly admits the significance of the role of partial demands and the minimum programme: “The Marxist political thesis must be the following: “While explaining constantly to the masses that rotting capitalism has no room either for the alleviation of their situation or even for the maintenance of their customary level of misery; while putting openly before the masses the tasks of the socialist revolution as the immediate task of our day……..the Communists……will at the same time lose no opportunity to snatch this or that partial concession from the enemy, or at least to prevent the further lowering of the living standard of the workers.”(14) Thus the inflexible perspective of the revolutionary offensive is modified and made more flexible in relation to this reluctant acceptance of the importance of partial demands. The precise role of partial demands is not explained but we can assume that it relates to the potential progressive importance they can have for promoting success in the class struggle. In this ambiguous manner Trotsky admits to the connection between immediate and transitional demands. It would have been more principled if Trotsky had explicitly outlined his reasons for supporting partial demands, and in this manner overcome the rigid limitations of his advocacy of the revolutionary offensive. However we can overcome the limitations and inconsistency in his standpoint by outlining a more systematic connection between immediate demands and the transitional approach. We can indicate that success in terms of the realisation of immediate or partial demands can be a prelude to mobilisation on the basis of the transitional programme, or the attainment of defensive tasks creates the conditions for the attempt to realise the socialist offensive.

However possibly one of the most unfortunate aspects of Trotsky’s criticism of the support of the immediate programme by the Comintern is to dismiss the importance of strikes in relation to the possibilities to develop the revolutionary offensive: “The proletariat has behind it a mighty schooling of revolution, of trade union and parliamentary struggle, with the whole positive and negative heritage of this rich past. From this one would hardly expect a spontaneous strike wave in France, even in a period of the rise of the business cycle, and still more so while the cyclical crisis deepens the misery of declining capitalism.”(15) He made this prediction shortly before the massive strike waves of 1936 and 1938! The point is that Trotsky’s dogmatic rejection of the immediate programme had led him to make this prediction that had no substance in relation to empirical reality. Instead – as he was to recognise – it was the very limitations of the Popular Front government that led to increasing working class discontent and the development of strikes. The workers utilised strikes because they were a traditional method of militancy and the manifestation of the aspiration to overcome the limitations of the present. However Trotsky dismissed the potential of strikes because of the very inflexible manner in which he presented his conception of the revolutionary offensive. He wanted reality to correspond to the programmatic schema that had had been invented by him rather than attempt to develop a programme that was based on actual events within reality. Hence he still conceived of the revolution in terms of a process led by a party and so underestimated the role of the actual struggles of the working class. This standpoint resulted in him rejecting the importance of the immediate programme even if he was acutely aware of the necessity to oppose fascism. He outlined an outstanding conception of the anti-Fascist aspect of the proletarian revolution in France, but he also ignored or rejected the economic aspects of the immediate programme and its role in developing class struggle. He was also brilliantly aware of the limitations of the Comintern, and its increasing adaptation to reformism, but this understanding also resulted in his one-sided and rigid conception of the revolutionary offensive. Despite his limitations Trotsky remained the articulate expression of opposition to the increasing counterrevolutionary politics of the Comintern. He understood that the central contradiction of the revolutionary process was between working class allegiance to the Comintern and the limitations of its politics. However this understanding sometimes led to justify dogmatism rather than flexible revolutionary politics.

Trotsky outlines the reasons why the struggle against Fascism must begin with the formation of armed militias in order to oppose the threat of counterrevolutionary violence which could demoralise the working class. He outlined how only the defeat of fascism could enable the working class to move forward towards higher forms of the class struggle like the application of the general strike. Our present situation is slightly different. We must attempt to popularise the role of the general strike as the ultimate expression of the development of the mass movement against austerity. This approach also enables us to go from a non-revolutionary situation to higher forms of class struggle. The present situation is one of demoralisation because the working class has not been presented seriously with the perspective of the general strike in order to oppose the austerity policy. This situation has been reinforced by the limitations of the trade union bureaucracy that is content to strive for the most modest of goals. The failure to establish a mass movement that is able to pose the issue of the general strike has resulted in profound demoralisation and the rise of right-wing populism. Hence the result is the decomposition of society because of the demise of the welfare state. In other words the present situation which is non-revolutionary is in danger of becoming counterrevolutionary. However it is still possible to move quickly from a non-revolutionary condition to a pre-revolutionary one in relation to the successful application of militant tactics that are able to obtain popular support. But this prospect is being undermined by the role of the Marxist groups that have an effective sceptical attitude concerning the possibility of success of mass struggle. They prefer self-imposed isolation and indulging in pessimism rather than attempting to concentrate on the elaboration of strategy that could promote the formation of a mass movement.

We argue in favour of the general strike because it is an expression of the highest level of development of the class struggle. The general strike would unite the working class in a single purpose and would represent the transformation of the situation from that of demoralisation and despondency into one of extreme militancy and understanding that the confidence of the class has tremendously increased. It should also be recognised that the general strike is the most effective means of defeating the austerity policy precisely because it is the supreme expression of the mighty power of a mass movement. Trotsky explains the importance of the general strike in the following manner: “The general strike, as every Marxist knows, is one of the most revolutionary methods of struggle. The general strike is not possible except at a time when the class struggle rises above the particular and craft demands, and extends over all occupational and district divisions, and wipes away the lines between the trade unions and the parties, between legality and illegality, and mobilizes the majority of the proletariat in an active opposition to the bourgeoisie and the state. Nothing can be on a higher plane than the general strike, except the armed insurrection. The entire history of the working class movement proves that every general strike, whatever may be the slogans under which it occurs, has an internal political tendency to transform itself into an open revolutionary clash, into direct struggle for power.”(16)

At present the aim of the general strike can only be a propaganda slogan. It has to be argued for in relation to the question of how to advance from the present defensive situation into the realisation of an offensive that is able to oppose the austerity policy in the most effective manner. The general strike should be the inspiration that is able to provide morale to all the various modest struggles that occur in the present. The aim is to transform the localised struggles into a mass strike wave that is able to pose practically the issue of the general strike. However this is unlikely to occur if the prevailing mood of demoralisation is not challenged by the increasing popularity of the strategy that has the primary aim of the promotion of the general strike. In this context Trotsky asks the question about how can we know that the working class is becoming receptive to the application of the tactic of the general strike? In relation to his situation he is able to argue that the French working class has already shown its militancy in the struggle against Fascism and so is becoming prepared to support the general strike. But he also outlines a general argument that has immense relevance for the present. He contends that the answer to this question can only be answered in terms of meaningful interaction between party and class: “Agitation is not only the means of communicating to the masses this or that slogan, calling the masses to action, etc. For a party that, agitation is also a means of lending an ear to the masses, of sounding out their moods and thoughts, and reaching this or another decision in accordance with the results. Only the Stalinists have transformed agitation into a noisy monologue. For the Marxists, the Leninists, agitation is always a dialogue with the masses.”(17)

The limitations of the Marxist organisations facilitate the increasing transformation of the non-revolutionary situation into what is becoming counterrevolutionary, and therefore promote the rise of the forces of reaction. However the aim of the general strike, if it becomes the popular aspiration of the masses within the EU, can quickly transform this situation. The point, as Trotsky outlines, is that the party must establish dialogue with the working class in order to establish what are its aspirations? In this context the party may be pleasantly surprised to discover that the aims of party and class are not dissimilar, but if the party is reluctant to establish dialogue with the class it will never discover the hopes of the class. The self-imposed isolation of the Marxist groups means that they engage in fantasy politics rather than try to elaborate a strategy that will promote the formation of mass movement against austerity. The Marxist left could reply and contend that the working class is demoralised and is not in favour of the general strike. This is possibly true but the point is that the Marxist left has not waged a campaign within the working class that outlines in a popular manner the arguments in favour of the general strike. The political struggle to promote the general strike has not taken place, and this is because dialogue with the working class has not occurred.

Trotsky is able to refute the view that the working class of France is conservative by being able to point to events that indicate its willingness to struggle. In the present situation the process of struggle has been more uneven and it could be argued that in general terms the working class has accepted the imposition of austerity. This point seems to be empirically true but it is also the result of the fact that working people have not been presented with an alternative that expresses the perspective of struggle. As Trotsky comments: “To determine to what degree the masses are ripe for the general strike and at the same time to strengthen the militant mood of the masses, it is necessary to place before them a program of revolutionary action.”(18) In other words it is necessary to test the willingness for militant activity, and the best expression of evaluating this prospect is to try and establish the level of popular support for an action programme. However this approach has generally not been tried by the Left because of their effective rejection of the importance of the role of working people as an agency of change. This is the implicit reasoning for their effective rejection of the perspective of the general strike. They know that the successful development of the general strike requires a militant and resolute mass movement and they are pessimistic that this possibility can be realised. But we should argue in favour of the general strike on the basis of the opposite reasoning. We know that a sustained campaign in favour of the general strike can result in the creation of a mass movement opposed to austerity. It is possible to undermine the reactionary influence of the trade union bureaucracy and Social Democracy by the principled advocacy of an action programme.

The culmination of this process of interaction between party and class in terms of the realisation of the general strike is crucial because its success is connected to the overthrow of capitalism: “Whatever may be the slogans and the motive for which the general strike is initiated, if it includes the genuine masses, and if these masses are quite resolved to struggle, the general strike inevitably poses before all classes in the nation the question: Who will be the master?”(19) At present this situation seems to be very distant and unlikely. However, we should aim to develop support for the general strike because it is the most appropriate and valid method of opposition to the austerity policy. Hardly anybody will support an open insurrection that has the potential for violence and civil war. But the aim of a general strike that has the policy of ending the austerity policy can attract mass support both within and beyond the trade union movement. In the process of developing the general strike it is possible that people become radicalised by the momentum of struggle and so the aim of ending capitalism becomes more popular and acceptable. Indeed this understanding is generated by the very character of the general strike which poses the issue about which class should dominate society. Defeat for the workers in the strike will mean that capitalism continues, whilst victory of the action will mean that the question of the overthrow of capitalism becomes valid and practical. The strike may have begun over modest aims but its victorious culmination will pose the issue of ending the present system. This is precisely why the trade union bureaucracy are against the general strike, but the Marxist left is also effectively sceptical because it has developed doubts about the capacity of the working class to engage in mass activity. The result of this ideological demoralisation of the Marxist left is to create a strategic impasse which contributes to the decline of the working class movement and so facilitates the development of a reactionary situation in political terms.

Trotsky’s following comment is about the 1930’s, but it could be equally applied to the present situation: “Either complete capitulation or revolutionary struggle for power – such are the alternatives which flow from the conditions of the present crisis. Whoever has not understood these alternatives, has no business in the camp of the proletariat.”(20) This seems to be a far-fetched view when applied to the present, but the point is that we already have capitulation to the ruling class because of the political and ideological reluctance to recognise the revolutionary character of the situation. It is the ruling class that have posed the alternative of submission to the reactionary programme of deflation and austerity or engage in struggle to overcome this situation by a revolutionary attempt to obtain political power. Hence the ruling class of the EU is calculating that the reformist heritage of the international working class is undermining the prospect of people making revolutionary conclusions about the present situation. In a sense they are right to conclude that the influence of ideology and tradition can overcome any impulse towards support for mass action and revolutionary perspectives. It could be argued that even the militancy in Greece has ultimately resulted in resigned acceptance of the austerity despite the immense undermining of living standards. Therefore any Marxist who does try to uphold a revolutionary standpoint has to be aware of the important influence of ideology and the reformist past of the workers movement. But at the same time we also know from Marx that ‘social being determines social consciousness’. The severe character of the austerity policy is generating the prospect for working people to develop radical conclusions about the present situation. Hence the role of Marxists should be to try and confirm these tentative conclusions in terms of the audacity of action programmes. We should make no apology for outlining a perspective that makes revolutionary conclusions. In this context this is how we should make arguments in favour of the general strike.

But the Marxist left act in accordance with pessimistic reasoning. They effectively contend that because the situation is not revolutionary in terms of levels of mobilisation and consciousness we should then reject the advocacy of a revolutionary programme. This is how the Left Unity organisation argues in favour of what is essentially a minimum programme. What is not recognised is that the aims of the minimum programme can only be defended by revolutionary methods. For example the defence of the welfare state can only be successfully achieved by the overthrow of capitalism. The extent of the crisis of capitalism means that cuts to public expenditure can only be ended by the demise of the present system. This point is confirmed by the Labour Party’s adherence to the austerity policy. However the generalised refusal to support the revolutionary approach has led to the pragmatic acceptance of the austerity policy and capitulation to the government. The refusal to militantly oppose the policy of deflation is because of the rejection of the approach of the revolutionary perspective. If the approach of the action programme is the only basis to represent the standpoint of opposition to the austerity policy this means that the development of revolutionary consciousness is required in order to promote the role of a mass movement. In contrast the Marxist left adapt to the forces preaching capitulation and retreat into their self-imposed fantasy world. This is because they have rejection revolutionary politics. We have to oppose this pessimism with the approach of a programme that supports the importance of the general strike. The alternative is disorderly retreat. This present situation is the product of an emphatic indifference towards strategy and the adaption of a minimum programme that tries to realistically make the argument in favour of the regeneration of the reformist alternative. The result of this approach is to contribute to the undermining of the militancy of the working class. Consequently the argument for the renewal of a mass movement of struggle means supporting the revolutionary programme.

The following comment of Trotsky could characterise the present situation: “On the part of the proletariat there are only phrases heard about taking the offensive; as a matter of fact, there is not even a defence put up. The positions are not being strengthened but surrendered without a battle, or are being prepared for surrender.”(21) This situation is a good description of the present. What characterises the mood of the working class is defeatism which is related to the lack of leadership of the trade unions and the pessimism of the Marxist groups. Essentially the very capacity of the working class to engage in struggle is being questioned rather than Marxism being preoccupied with the task of developing a strategy that can promote mass activity. The result of this situation is an adaptation to what is and the rejection of generating hope about what could be. It is accepted that the austerity policy will not be challenged by a mass movement and instead the emphasis is about the prospects of the Labour Party at the next election. What is not understood is that the Coalition government in the UK is a government of crisis and so could be undermined and overthrown by the determined efforts of mass action. Instead what is prevalent in this situation is demoralisation within the working class and decomposition of society. The pessimism of the Marxist left means that it is not preoccupied with developing strategies that will enhance the confidence and class consciousness of the workers. Instead the Marxist left relies for its false optimism on economic determinism and obsession with schemas about the falling rate of profit. But as Trotsky also argued: “The political relationship of forces is determined not solely by the objective factors (the role in the productive process, numerical strength, etc.) but by subjective factors: the consciousness of strength is the most important element of actual strength.”(22) However the Marxist Left is not concerned with the dismal lack of confidence within the working class because it does not consider that this condition can be improved. Instead it is preoccupied with its own crisis of confidence and does not recognise that this is a reflection of the low level of consciousness within the working class.

What is Trotsky’s remedy for what seems to be a dire situation? He contends: “Our rule remains what it always was: to say what is. That is the greatest service that one can now perform for the revolutionary cause. The forces of the proletariat have not been expended.”(23) We would suggest that to say what is the truth about the present situation is to reject the view that the proletariat has been defeated without a battle being waged. The mood of demoralisation this is not because of any structural incapacity of the working class and instead is the result of the influence of ideology, tradition and the reactionary role of the trade union bureaucracy and the Marxist organisations. The central issue is to overcome the defeatism that undermines the class cohesion of the working class and to therefore develop a strategy that can inspire the belief that victory is possible. As Trotsky argues: “Victory is possible! Even more victory is certain – insofar as victory can be made certain in advance – provided only that we have the will to victory. We must aspire to victory, we must surmount the obstacles, we must overwhelm the enemy, knock him down, and put our knee on his chest.”(24) The hint of inevitability in this comment should be rejected but we should uphold the understanding that the only principled and worthwhile perspective is one that provides inspiration to carry out intransigent class struggle and is prepared to tackle any difficulties in a resolute manner. However if we adopt the opposite approach of pessimism we are defeated before we even enter into battle. This pessimism is the present standpoint of the Marxist Left. They provide no leadership that will enable the working class to overcome its demoralised mood. This situation is expressed by a lack of strategic imagination and the failure to argue for revolutionary perspectives within the working class. The result is capitulation to the supposed omnipotence of the bourgeoisie. The Marxist Left has accepted the end of history!

Trotsky outlined how the call for the formation of Committees of Action could promote the development of mass struggle against fascism in the 1930’s. We could argue that the development of these mass organisations could generate militant struggle in the present: “The workers will be able to elect a committee of action only in those cases in which they themselves participate in some form of action and feel the need for revolutionary leadership. In question here is not the formal democratic representation of all and any masses, but the revolutionary representation of the struggling masses.”(25) In the present context this could mean that the development of any strike action should be taken out of the control of the trade union bureaucracy and instead leadership provided by the committee of action. The overall strategic aim of the Committee of Action would be to develop a general strike against the austerity policy. The aim of the Committees of Action would be to provide unity to the various localised developments and provide them with the unifying aim of the general strike. In other words the role of the Committees of Action could be described in the following terms: “Committees of Action at their present stage have as their task to unite the toiling masses of France in a defensive struggle and thus imbue these masses with the consciousness of their own power for the coming offensive. Whether matters will reach the point of genuine soviets depends on whether the present current situation in France will unfold to the ultimate revolutionary conclusions.”(26) The point is that the strategic focus of the Committees of Action becomes the organisational and political expression of the renewal of the confidence of the working class in terms of their effectiveness in transforming a situation of defeat into victory, and the related ability to achieve progress from a defensive situation into the prospects of a revolutionary offensive. In this dynamic context the role of the Committees of Action will be to overcome the prevailing defeatist mood and to re-build confidence that victory in the class struggle can be realised. Hence their strategic role is to prepare the basis for the possibility of the general strike.

What is the difference between the Peoples Assemblies and the Committees of Action? The answer to this question is that there does not have to be a difference and it is entirely possible that the already established Peoples Assemblies could act like Committees of Action. However this is not likely to occur at present because the Peoples Assemblies are content to act as talking shops and lack a strategy that could promote a revolutionary offensive against the austerity policy. There would have to be a fundamental change to the functions and ideology of the Peoples Assemblies if they were to become militant type organs of class struggle. The limitations of the Peoples Assemblies means that we would contend that there is no substitute for the formation of Committees of Action as the most principled expression of the class struggle.

Contrary to his former predictions about the limitations of strikes, Trotsky reversed his opinion and argued that the mass strikes of 1936 in France had transformed the situation. The Fascists had been put onto the defensive and the limitations of the Popular Front had become more apparent. Hence the balance of class forces was changing in favour of the working class. Sectionalism within the working class is being overcome and the revolution is beginning: “The entire class has been set in motion. This colossal mass cannot be stopped by words. The struggle must be consummated either in the greatest of victories or the most ghastly of defeats.”(27) Hence the scope and extent of the strikes can create the logic of revolution: “The profound organic and genuinely revolutionary character of the strike wave is best of all characterized by the fact that the mass movement, though improvised, has acquired such vast scope and has exercised so great a political influence. This is the guarantee of the endurance of the movement, its stubbornness, and the inevitability of a series of ever-rising waves. But this is not enough for victory. As against the staff and the plan of the “200 families” there must be a staff and plan of proletarian revolution. None as yet exist. But they can be created. All the pre-requisites and all the elements for a new crystallization of the masses are at hand.”(28) Trotsky had unintentionally outlined the basis of contemporary proletarian revolution. He indicated that an escalating development of strikes could create a momentum that would pose the question of which class ruled society. (His standpoint was an elaboration of the approach of Rosa Luxemburg) He showed that the militancy and dynamism of the strikes could challenge the very limitations of the parliamentary preoccupations of the various Socialist parties and create a situation in which the legacy of reformism was being undermined by spontaneous revolutionary mass action. However he still argued that the influence of Marxism was vital if the strikes were to realise their full potential with the overthrow of capitalism. The conscious influence of the party was vital if the spontaneous potential of the strikes was to be realised.

If we apply this situation to the present we could argue that the development of strikes would be vital for the development of the morale of the working class. The very outbreak of strikes could become generalised and so create questions about the continued domination of the ruling class. It is entirely possible that the general strike could occur as a result of the impulse of the mass strikes. These strategic possibilities are important reasons why we would call for the formation of Committees of Action in order to encourage the development of strikes against the austerity policy. The role of the Committees of Action would be to encourage the renewal of militancy within the working class and in order to challenge the prevailing mood of defeatism and demoralisation. It would be the task of Marxists to overcome their present despondency and instead advocate a strategy of revolution with Committees of Action playing a pivotal role. However, primarily the development of strikes would be invaluable for raising the confidence of the working class: “The proletariat was itself in greatest need of this demonstration of its strength. The practical successes won, however precarious they may be, cannot fail to raise the self-confidence of the masses to an extraordinary degree, particularly among the most backward and oppressed strata.”(29) Trotsky’s comments would be very appropriate for the present when the working class is gripped by a sense of inferiority and defeatist mood about the inability to change political reality. Trotsky also outlines how the strikes create a new and potentially revolutionary leadership. This is the leadership of the rank and file and it is a challenge to the bureaucratic conservatism of the existing trade unions and political parties.

What will become primarily apparent in the situation of the advance of the strike wave will be the necessity of revolutionary leadership: “Further easy successes cannot be expected by the masses. Faced with the danger of losing what seemed to have been won, faced with the growing resistance of the enemy and the confusion and indecision of the official leadership, the masses will feel the burning need of a program, an organization, a plan and a staff. For this we must prepare ourselves and the advanced workers. In the atmosphere of revolution the masses are swiftly re-educated, the cadres swiftly selected and tempered.”(30) In the present context the Marxist left would have to overcome its present stagnation or face ridicule as being totally irrelevant for the requirements of the class struggle. But it is to be hoped that the renewal of militancy will regenerate the Marxist left and resolve their tendency for pessimism. The result of this situation would be the creation of the political conditions that could lead to the formation of a mass Marxist party. But primarily the process of the class struggle will create the cadres of the rejuvenated revolutionary organisation: “The new organization must correspond to the nature of the movement itself. It must reflect the struggling masses. It must express their growing will. This is a question of the direct representation of the revolutionary class. Here it is not necessary to invent new forms. Historical precedents exist. The industries and factories will elect their deputies who will meet to elaborate jointly plans of struggle and to provide the leadership. Nor is it necessary to invent the name for such an organization: it is the soviets of workers deputies.”(31) The logic of the intensification of the class struggle, via the importance of strikes, is to create a situation in which the formation of soviets is an expression of the role of the revolutionary party.

The perspective that is being outlined by Trotsky because of the influence of the significance of the mass strikes is to suggest that the traditional Bolshevik conception of the party led revolution or insurrection should be modified, and instead what is crucial is the effective creation of the identity between party and class in the form of the Soviet. The outcome of the mass strikes is the development of the Soviet that will act like a party and provide the perspective and strategy of the necessity of political power. Hence what is implied is that the differentiation between the party and class is overcome by the role of the mass strikes and instead the party is created in the process of struggle in the form of the emergence of the Soviet. The aim of the party-Soviet will be to establish leadership of the class as a whole and provides a perspective about how the mass power of the class can be utilised in relation to the task of the overthrow of capitalism. What is primarily important for the task of revolution is not the formation of the party as a distinct entity that is separate from the class and instead the character of the party and class are merged into one single organic unity. This ensures the proletarian character of the party and enables the party to act as the expression of the aspiration of the class.

Trotsky has understood that an important aspect of the opportunism of reformism is that it has become a privileged layer that is distinct from the rest of the class, and so in order to overcome this problem it is necessary that the party emerges from the class as the result of mass struggles and strikes. In this manner the party-soviet will be revolutionary and militant and opposed to opportunism. As an expression of the most militant impulses of the class, the party-soviet will be concerned with the tasks expressed by the intensification of class conflict and the struggle for power: “Even by June the anonymous leaders of the awakened class had found methods and forms of struggle with magnificent revolutionary tact. The molecular process of mass consciousness is not being suspended now for a single hour. All this enables us to conclude that the new layer of leaders will not only remain true to the masses in the days of the inevitable and probably not far distant conflict, but will also be prepared to lead the inadequately prepared army without a rout.”(32)

Hence the role of the traditional revolutionary party is reduced to the important propaganda tasks of warning the class about the possibility of the intensification of the difficulties of the mass struggle before it is possible to take power. This party should carry out its duty of promoting an action programme in order to influence the advance of the mass movement but the actual initiatives and creative impulses should be generated by the Party-soviet and the role of the working class in general. It may be that the role of the separate revolutionary party has become secondary but it is still influential as a strategic guide to the mass actions, and it is especially important in relation to providing advice about possible problems such as concerning the resistance of the ruling class and in indicating the limitations of the reformist parties. However the distinct revolutionary party is no longer the leadership of the struggle and is instead acts as its advisor. The party is able to indicate that the strength of the mass movement combined with the confusion this has caused in the ruling class is an indication of the possibility for proletarian revolution. The trade unions have been transformed by the mass activity and the limitations of the reformist organisations have been graphically revealed. Hence the only conclusion that can be made is that: “The propaganda for a general strike, for factory committees, for workers control, has been exclusively carried on by a political organization, i.e., a party. It could not be otherwise. The mass organizations of the working class remain powerless, undecided, and lost if they are not inspired and led forward by a firmly welded together vanguard. The necessity for a new revolutionary party is shown with new force.”(33)

This viewpoint seems to be a regression to the traditional view of calling for a distinct Bolshevik party. But this would be a misleading conclusion because Trotsky considers that the only genuine and authentic party is one of a new type, which is an expression of the very tempo and character of the mass struggle. This is why the question of the formation and development of the party cannot be defined except in terms of the intimate involvement of the party in the activity of the class. The very formation of the Fourth International is connected to the impulses of the mass struggles. Hence he concludes that: “Participation in the living struggle, always in the front line of fire, work in the trade unions, and the building up of the party – all go on at the same time, mutually supplementing each other. All the fighting slogans – workers control, workers militia, the arming of the workers, a government of workers and peasants, the socialization of the means of production – are indissolubly bound up with the creation of workers, peasants, and soldiers soviets.”(34) In other words the question of the development of the programme and the process of agitation for demands is closely connected to the promotion of mass struggle and the formation of the organisations of the working class. The suggestion is that the most sophisticated programme will be created when the workers are able to establish the highest level of organisation which is the soviet. The development of the Soviet will then generate the possibility to overthrow the capitalist class. This is because the Soviet represents the organisation with the most revolutionary potential. The role of the party is not to impose its will on the Soviet and instead it should influence the Soviet to carry out its historic function of revolution: “The conquest of power by the proletariat is possible only on the road of armed insurrection against the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie. The smashing of this apparatus and its replacement by worker, soldier and peasant councils is the necessary condition for the fulfilment of the socialist program.”(35)

This perspective of Trotsky should be of crucial importance for the Marxist left of the present. The result of their pessimism is that they neglect the task of trying to develop a strategy for the overthrow of capitalism and instead can only conceive of modest and realistic programmes for a left-wing government to implement by Parliamentary methods. What is ignored is the centrality and significance of the agency of the working class, and therefore what is being defended is the elitist conception of the party led revolution. But what Trotsky learnt from the events of 1936 and 1938 was that the mass struggles of the workers could result in socialist transformation. This meant it was necessary to develop a modified conception of proletarian revolution that placed even greater emphasis on the role of the working class within the process of social change. In a certain manner the very actions of the working class were creating the party and the programme of the revolution. They were creating the soviets that would be the instruments of the overthrow of capitalism. Hence the role of the party was to make conscious what was already becoming implicit in the activity of the class struggle. Consequently the party should not dictate strategy and instead its task was to act as advisor and to influence the mass activity generated by and promoted by working class militancy. The role of the party was to point out that the logic of mass struggle was to facilitate the prospect of revolution. But only the mass movement could ensure whether the revolution was realised or did not occur and reaction was triumphant.

However, what is the relevance of this viewpoint for the present situation? Within the EU there has been only sporadic resistance to the austerity policy and serious questions have been raised about the ability of the working class to engage in collective action. Only in Greece did there occur generalised forms of mass action and the revival of Left politics. This overall situation is expressed in the demoralisation of the Marxist Left and the inability of this Left to interact with the class. How will it be possible to promote Trotsky’s 1930’s conception of proletarian revolution? The first step in this process of renewal is for the Left to engage is serious dialogue with the working class. They may be surprised. There is massive discontent and frustration about the lack of action. The Left could begin to provide answers to this situation by developing imaginative strategies that attempt to promote the possibility of the development of mass movement. In order to indicate the serious intent of these strategies the role of the general strike should be its primary expression. But it would be problematical if the question of the relationship between party and class is posed in terms of instruction and imposition. This elitist attempt to establish the domination of the party over the class will be resented and opposed. The result will be the failure of the various strategies. Instead the aim of serious dialogue between party and class will be to promote the mass power of the working class. The task of the strategies will be to generate the development of a mass movement of struggle against the austerity policy. Hence the dynamism and initiative will be with the forces of the struggle and the dynamism of the mass actions will decide what should be the next steps to be taken in the class struggle. It is to be expected that the development of mass strikes will ultimately pose the question of the general strike. The various Marxist parties can make the argument in favour of the general strike but only the dynamism and creativity of the mass movement can bring about its actual realisation. In order to logically progress towards the question of the general strike the formation of Soviets or workers councils will be vital. (These could also be called Committees of Action) This development will indicate the growing revolutionary maturity of the workers engaged in struggle. The Soviet will be the merging of the party and class in terms of adherence to a common revolutionary strategy and determination to realise the general strike. In this context only the Soviet, as the political will of the working class, can decide whether the general strike should become an insurrection to bring about the overthrow of capitalism.

It could be argued that the present situation is not remotely similar to the mass strike wave of France in the mid 1930’s. This is probably true. But the point is that the Marxist Left does not have an accurate indication of the mood of the working class within the EU because it has not systematically and consistently engaged in dialogue. In this context the very mood of demoralisation is not being challenged by the argument of alternatives to adapting to what is. We would suggest that it is quite possible that the most audacious and revolutionary perspectives will have the most enthusiastic reception because of the very fact that they indicate an alternative to the present situation. This is because the view of Trotsky is crucial: the greater is the crisis the more relevant and necessary is the importance of a revolutionary offensive in order to transform the present situation. In the modern context what is inadequate and limited is the endless days of action called by the trade union bureaucracy. Instead what we require is the escalation of the mass strike and the progress of determined and generalised opposition to the austerity policy. This is the only basis to put the ruling class onto the defensive and to create a crisis of the political system that can establish favourable conditions for the calling of the general strike. But in order for this possibility to occur we need to create Committees of Action that take the control of strikes and disputes out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy and instead the initiative is with the rank and file. It is true that we may never overcome the present condition of demoralisation because of the legacy of past defeats and the reactionary role of the trade union bureaucracy. But unless we argue in favour a revolutionary offensive (that is the task of the Marxist Left) we will never know what could be the level of support for such actions. Instead the demoralisation of the Marxist Left means that it adapts to the modest and defensive mentality of the trade union bureaucracy. The result of this situation is increasing demoralisation and mass acceptance of the austerity policy.

Trotsky outlines how the only possible strategic conclusion to a generalised strike wave and the occupation of factories is the general strike: “The French workers have recently passed through a tumultuous strike wave, including the occupation of the factories. The subsequent stage for them could not have been anything but a genuine revolutionary general strike, which poses on the agenda the conquest of power.”(36) This is the type of perspective that we should be arguing for in the present. If we are to suggest how the defensive and non-revolutionary situation is to become revolutionary there is no alternative than to advocate the development of a mass strike wave that can transform the situation. The mass strike is the mediation between the present condition of demoralisation and lack of militant action and the creation of a situation with more promise and the possibility of a genuine revolutionary offensive. But the longer the situation is characterised by passivity and the rigid domination of the trade union bureaucracy the more difficult will it be to promote the prospect of strikes. Marxism should recognise the difficulties of the situation and provide arguments that would justify the alternative of militancy and the promotion of a mass movement. We should explain that the consequences of the failure to go onto the offensive are the generation of a counterrevolutionary situation in which the forces of right-wing populism and fascism become increasingly influential.

Trotsky explains the dynamics of the class struggle very cogently: “Recent history has furnished a series of tragic confirmations of the fact that it is not from every revolutionary situation that a revolution arises, but that a revolutionary situation becomes counterrevolutionary if the subjective factor, that is, the revolutionary offensive of the revolutionary class, does not come in time to aid the objective factor.”(37) It could be argued that Trotsky is describing a situation that represents a higher level of class struggle than that which presently exists in the EU. This is true, but the dynamics are very similar because he is explaining the possible dire and reactionary consequences of the failure of the working class to engage in a revolutionary offensive in a period of crisis. The possible regressive results in mid 1930’s France is that a revolutionary situation could become counterrevolutionary, whilst in the present what is still a non-revolutionary situation is liable to be transformed into a situation that can only promote the politics of reaction. The only perspective that can transform these situations in a progressive manner is by the method of the revolutionary offensive or the intensification of the class struggle. In mid 1930’s France Trotsky was able to argue that the very actions of the working class indicated that it was receptive to a strategy that advocated a revolutionary offensive. But in a different situation we cannot make a similar argument. Instead we have to suggest that the discontent of the working class could make it receptive to the aims of a revolutionary offensive. We can only test out this proposition in terms of dialogue with the class. In contrast to the advocates of pessimism we believe that support for the general strike is at acceptable levels that would mean agitation in favour of this demand would not be a futile exercise. At the very least we could have provided important and favourable publicity for the approach of militancy and the necessity of a mass movement. In contrast the Marxist Left adapts to the supposed realism of the situation and is even doubtful about the possibilities for collective action. Their standpoint becomes part of the reasons why the working class should not try to overcome its demoralised condition. The result of this scepticism is the promotion of the validity of counterrevolutionary politics.

Trotsky asks serious questions about the willingness of the working class to struggle: “Nevertheless, how shall we present matters concerning the “subjective factor”, that is, concerning the will of the proletariat to struggle? This question – precisely because it concerns the subjective sphere and not the objective – cannot be resolved by a precise a priori investigation. What decides in the final score is living action, that is, the real course of the struggle.”(38) It was relatively easy to answer this question in mid 1930’s France because of the actual expression of high levels of militant action by the working class. But in the present conditions we have a much more difficult task to discover the willingness to struggle because of the uneven levels of protest within the EU. The situation is complicated by the fact that discontent with the austerity is often not translated into effective action. However, we have no alternative than to argue in favour of mass strikes and a revolutionary offensive. The point is that without a revolutionary offensive, which could culminate in the general strike, the austerity policy will not be defeated. In this context we can surrender to the ruling class without a struggle, or we can engage in mass action that possibly results in victory. It is the important task of Marxists to pose these prospects of victory or defeat in the most vivid manner. Indeed it could be argued the effects of defeat are already being expressed in terms of the implementation of vicious public expenditure cuts. However, we have to advocate a revolutionary offensive in the most constructive manner and outline how the working class has the ability to defeat the austerity policy. The central point we can make is that the only definite criteria that indicates the balance of class forces is by actual involvement in action: “Nevertheless, for all revolutionary Marxists it is now more evident than ever that the only serious and definitive measure of the relationship of forces, among them the willingness of the masses to struggle, is action.”(39)

In other words the longer the working class of the EU is generally in a condition of passivity the more insistent becomes the view that it has not got the collective ability to engage in mass action. Only the actual involvement of the working class in militant struggle will be able to answer this question. The test of action will provide the definite answer to the questions being raised about the collective capacities of the working class. Trotsky indicates how the strike waves of 1936 and 1938 provided constructive lessons about the ability of the working class to act: “At the same time the movements of 1936 as well as 1938 have enriched the entire proletariat with invaluable experience and developed thousands of local workers leaders independent of the official bureaucracy. It is necessary to understand how to find access to these leaders, to link them with one another, to arm them with a revolutionary program.”(40) It is entirely possible that mass action in the present could realise similar results. However, what is problematical is the present condition of demoralisation and a sense of defeat before battle has even been waged. Hence it is the vital task of the Marxist Left to promote a sense of hope within the working class, but this prospect is being undermined by the prevalence of pessimism that generates scepticism about the collective capacity of the working class. This is why Trotsky argues that the question of victory is impossible unless: “But this variant suggests such an invigoration of the hope of the masses, of their confidence in themselves, of their ardour, of their hate for the enemy, that all that is mean, mediocre, crude, will be cast aside and scattered to the wind.”(41)

The contemporary expression of this mood of defeatism takes the form of escapism and a low level of political culture. There is a sense that nothing can be done and that the ruling class can carry out its policies without being questioned or opposed. Hence the actual task that confronts the Marxist left is not the rationalisation of pessimism and is instead the promotion of hope within the working class. This process can take the most definite form of the elaboration of a strategy that can relate to the popular imagination. In this context the general strike has a vital role because of the very fact that it would pose the question as to which class rules society. But instead of the attempt to generate hope within the working class the Marxist left instead abdicates its important role of trying to argue for the socialist programme within the working class. The result is that strategy is replaced by various obsessions and concentration on aspects of Marxist dogma. Instead of this self-imposed exile we have to uphold the arguments in favour of a revolutionary offensive and the development of a mass strike wave. This development would transform the working class movement and resolve the pessimism of the Marxist left in a constructive manner. The situation would also become favourable for the formation of the party-class and Soviets. A general strike would become a practical question and is no longer based on mythical qualities. However, none of this is possible unless we recognise the present situation as it actually is, which is expressed by demoralisation. This means the character of the arguments in favour of the revolutionary offensive have to be of the highest quality. We cannot be satisfied with dogmatic views that gloss over the complexity of problems connected to the difficulties involved in generating the class struggle. Instead we have to offer convincing reasons why the alternative to the austerity policy requires the generation of a mass movement. In this context we also have to indicate that belief in the progressive role of a Labour government is an illusion and is already shown to be fallacy by its effective support for deflation. The only alternative to austerity is working class action. Furthermore, this action cannot be modest and defensive and is most practical, principled and effective when it becomes part of a socialist offensive. In order to reject the approach of austerity we have to develop action with a revolutionary character and consciousness. This viewpoint should be the contemporary message of Marxists.

FOOTNOTES:

erefore it is unlikely that

(1)Leon Trotsky: ‘Wither France’ In ‘Writings on France’, Pathfinder Press, New York, p27-61

(2) ibid p51

(3) ibid p51

(4) ibid p52

(5) ibid p68

(6) ibid p69

(7) ibid p72

(8) ibid p77

(9) ibid p77

(10) ibid p79

(11) ibid p80

(12) ibid p79

(13) ibid p80-81

(14) ibid p82-83

(15) ibid p85

(16) ibid p93-94

(17) ibid p95

(18) ibid p99

(19) ibid p100

(20) ibid p100

(21) ibid p127

(22Ibid p127

(23) ibid p128

(24) ibid p128

(25) ibid p131

(26) ibid p133

(27) ibid p163-164

(28) ibid p164-165

(29) ibid p165

(30) ibid p166

(31) ibid p166

(32) ibid p173

(33) Ibid179

(34) ibid p180

(35) ibid p182

(36) ibid p198

(37) ibid p200

(38) ibid p202

(39) ibid p203

(40) ibid p203

(41) ibid p206