A CRITIQUE OF THE PLATFORM OF RED FLAG BY THE DSA

INTRODUCTION

The organisation that used to be known as Workers Power has dissolved itself in order to become part of the Labour Party. They have adopted the new name of the Red Flag and publicised a platform which we will analyse. However a crucial question that we would raise for the Red Flag to address is whether they have rejected their past authoritarian methods and practices? It is one thing to uphold a platform that has many supportable policies, but the vital issue is whether they have politically changed in order to encourage dissent and open discussion. We hope that the answer to this question is encouraging. The DSA is opposed to the rigid party regimes that stifle talent, and instead promote conformity in the name of Marxism. We joined Left Unity because it expressed the aspiration to be open minded, and is in favour of democratic discussion of policy. In contrast, the various party regimes, such as the SP, SWP, and smaller groups like Workers Power, have stifled the flowering of democracy and supported a rigid orthodoxy. However, developments in the Labour Party have created problems for these authoritarian regimes. It seems that the LP under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn has become a focus for the renewal of left-wing ideas. The era of the centralist party regime is over. In contrast, the left wing of LP has sponsored a pressure group called Momentum which could become the agency for the struggle for the advance of democratic socialism. Left Unity is committed to supporting this process whilst also retaining its organisational distinctiveness and support for left-wing ideas. The DSA acts to ensure that Left Unity retains its principles and therefore can become the basis for the flourishing of Marxist politics outside the LP. We critically support developments inside the LP, but also understand that revolutionary politics has to advance in relation to the promotion of a distinctive Marxist party.

THE RED FLAG PLATFORM

The supporters of Red Flag have adopted a revolutionary socialist platform for work within the Labour party (LP) and working class communities. They call for a LP with democratic socialist policies, and outline how this aim will be realised. The platform suggests that the aspiration to create a left wing LP has to be connected to the development of a mass movement against austerity and for the realisation of socialism. But this perspective ignores the problem of the present balance of forces within the LP. It is necessary to understand that the LP still remains a bourgeois organisation which has a contradictory relationship to its new left-wing leader. This tension has already manifested itself in relation to the right-wing revolt on the question of military action against Syria. Therefore what is crucial is that a battle of ideas takes place within the LP and Parliamentary LP in order to determine its political character. The Red Flag platform neglects this task. It is vital to understand that the dominant influence within the LP is still the right-wing Blairites organised within the parliamentary party. Hence in order to realise political changes within the LP it is necessary to engage in ideological struggle with the right wing. The success of this process can bring about the demise of the importance of ‘New Labour’, and instead create an organised and popular basis of critical support for Corbyn both inside and outside the LP.

It is also necessary to define the politics of Jeremy Corbyn. Red Flag neglect this task. We would argue that he is a principled left-wing reformist who aims to establish a fairer and more just society. It is questionable whether this amounts to the advocacy of socialism. However despite these limitations his election as leader of the LP has raised the expectations of significant sections of the population, especially young people, and therefore created a climate in which the issue of alternatives to the Tories can be seriously discussed. Thus Red Flag is right to call for the formation of a revived LP with socialist policies. However, we must also be cautious and recognise that we presently have not achieved this development. It is still necessary to wage a protracted struggle in order to create a LP with a socialist programme. This development must be the aim of all Marxists within the LP, and in order to advance this prospect of the creation of a mass socialist party we must engage in educational and political struggle in favour of democratic socialism, and against the right-wing reformism of Blairism.

The Red Flag is correct to suggest that these political tasks have to be combined with the attempt to build the LP within working class communities. It is not possible to build a socialist party that lacks popular support. We need to convince the working class of why we should reject anti-migration views and chauvinist support for withdrawal from the EU. These ideological tasks need to be connected to the constructive attempt to generate support for international socialism and the development of a communist society. If the Marxists within the LP are successful in the creation of support for these views the result could ultimately be political struggle against the limitations of the left-wing reformism of Corbyn. But we do recognise that the most immediate task is to provide critical support for Corbyn in relation to the attempt to undermine the right–wing domination within the LP and PLP. In this context we must be critical of Corbyn when he makes unnecessary concessions to the right wing. Only the development of a distinctive left wing and Marxist voice within the LP can ensure that the result of Corbyn’s role is not accommodation to the right wing.

Red Flag is right to argue that political tasks related to the LP should not result in the neglect of the primary issue of developing a mass movement of opposition to the policies of the Tory government. The aim is social revolution, and the establishment of a democratically planned economy, that is the prelude of transition to socialism both nationally and globally. In this context the question of the realisation of Red Flag’s demand for: “a left-wing Labour government that breaks with the capitalists and their agenda of austerity and war” is conditional on the situation of class struggle. Our primary aim should be the success of revolutionary tasks, which will culminate in the formation of a workers government that aims to undermine capitalism, and therefore advances the progress of the realisation of socialism. In this context the question as to whether a Labour government is a workers government depends on the character of its support and the aims it is preparing to realise. If the Labour government intends to act as a workers government, then Marxists can give it critical support. However, if this Labour government is based on conciliation of capitalism it cannot be supported. If the working class has illusions in this type of unprincipled Labour government we should struggle a build a workers government that is independent of the LP. This process will involve the establishment of extra-parliamentary organs of mass activity such as workers councils, or Soviets. We should not be reluctant to raise the call in this situation for ‘all power to the workers councils’.

Despite these reservations about the revolutionary potential of a left wing Labour government we should not be reluctant to critically support its election as a result of popular mass support. But we have to understand that any left wing Labour government can only become genuinely revolutionary when it has the popular support of a mass movement. The point being made is that the role of a future Labour government has to be understood in flexible tactical and possibly changeable terms. Our strategy should be for a workers government, which may, or may not be, the LP winning a Parliamentary election under a left-wing leadership. If this situation does occur we should not dogmatically reject the possibility of transforming the left wing Labour government into a workers government in relation to the approach suggested. But neither should we entertain illusions that a Corbyn led Labour government should automatically be defined as a workers government. Instead we should assess the situation in terms of the ability and capacity of the class struggle to create popular organs of democracy which can sustain and uphold the development of a workers government. Without this development, or intensification of the class struggle, the emergence of a workers government is unlikely.

Red Flag is right to suggest that the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the LP should motivate our determination to struggle against austerity and in favour of the socialist alternative. We recognise that the austerity policy has been the pretext to undermine the material interests of the working class, and has destroyed the effectiveness of the public services. The right wing of the PLP has been characterised by its confusing support for the austerity policy. Hence opposing the right wing of the PLP is identical to promoting opposition to austerity, and therefore upholding the politics of a definite break with the standpoint of the Tories and the forces of global capital. It is also necessary to outline how the trade union bureaucracy has been an important limitation in the development of opposition to austerity. Thus rank and file control of the unions will be crucial if the possibility to promote a mass movement against austerity is to be advanced. The anti-austerity comments of the new LP leadership are to be welcomed, but they should also explicitly support the development of mass struggles of opposition to austerity. The Red Flag is right to connect the aims of rejecting austerity to the perspective of creating a new socialist and planned economy. However their description of the alternative society ignores the importance of industrial democracy. We uphold the view that the most important aspect of socialism is workers control of production. Only an economy based on the genuine participation of the producers and consumers can result in a society that overcomes the alienation and exploitation of capitalism. The development of industrial democracy is the most effective basis to ensure that genuine socialism is created on the basis of the realisation of material needs. It is true that the Red Flag does outline measures to end exploitation, and these include nationalisation under workers control, but this policy is not explained as being the primary basis of new relations of production. Hence the conception of socialist planning based on direct democracy is briefly stated as a slogan, and so this policy is not established as the strategic primary basis for the transformation of society without exploitation and the end of the exploitation of labour by capital.

The Red Flag demand for a ten pound minimum wage is not generous, and this living wage should be at least fifteen pounds per day, but the primary issue is actually about ending low pay and replacing it with a system of differentials that aims to promote equality. In other words the wages system of capitalism should be transformed and instead based on the development of remuneration that does not represent a differential greater than a ratio of 1:4. The Red Flag also outline measures to defend public services, and for ending cuts in local authority expenditure. This latter aim is connected to criticism of the acceptance by LP councils of the Tory cuts, and there is support for developing a struggle by the local authorities, including illegal budgets, against the effects of austerity.

The Red Flag outline principled measures to extend democracy, such as votes at 16, one year parliaments, proportional representation, abolition of the monarchy, House of Lords and Privy Council, and self-determination for Scotland and Wales. They recognise that the popular vote for the SNP means that a genuine mandate for self-determination in Scotland is possible. On international questions the demands are also principled, such as support for the Kurds military struggle but opposition to military action by imperialism in Syria, and the position on the EU is in favour a yes vote for membership of the EU on the basis of the principles of socialism and internationalism. They recognise that the national chauvinist opposition to the UK’s membership of the EU is based on reactionary ideas and the influence of UKIP. However the question of the EU is not explicitly connected to the necessity of a socialist campaign to unite the working class within the EU for the internationalist struggle for the overthrow of capitalism. Instead the question of the United Socialist States of Europe is posed in a distant and abstract manner.

The platform of the Red Flag is aware that the LP still operates on the basis of restrictive bans and prescriptions that undermine the possibility of Marxists to freely join the LP. A call is also made to realise the democratic control of the LP by its members instead of the present control of the PLP. What is also understood is that the adoption of a democratic and socialist constitution will be vital in the process of the transformation of the LP into becoming an agency of revolutionary change. Hence the pessimistic view that the LP can never be changed in progressive terms is rejected, and instead what is outlined is a series of measures that would internally transform the character of the LP and make it an agency for revolutionary objectives. What is omitted from this perspective is any understanding of the present balance of forces within the LP. This analysis would make an assessment of the prospect of the transformation of the LP more intelligible. In order to undermine any illusions we have to recognise that Corbyn and McDonnell represent a Bonapartist leadership with popular support, but the LP is still dominated by the right wing PLP. The prospects for the transformation of the LP are fragile and uncertain. In contrast, the Red Flag platform tends to accommodate complacency, and phrases about ‘a revived Labour Party with socialist policies’ tend to suggest that victory over the right wing is virtually assured.

Furthermore, the ideology of reformism has become entrenched within the LP, and provides formidable opposition to genuine left-wing change. In this context the question of the necessary political struggle by the left wing against the right wing is avoided by Red Flag, and instead they are content with the formal importance of the right of recall of MP’s, etc. Hence the vital importance of the battle of ideas within the LP is glossed over. In a limited manner, Red Flag call upon the newly formed Momentum organisation to be the conscious instrument for the promotion of left wing ideas, and therefore become the related rejection of the ideological influence of the right wing. The point is that the organisational measures proposed by the Red Flag are not sufficient in order to facilitate the transformation of the LP. What is vital and crucial is the conscious role of ideological struggle. At present the forces of the left wing are not organised in support of democratic socialist ideas, whilst the Blairites have a coherent right wing ideology. It will only be possible to defeat the forces of the right wing by political struggle. The tasks of theory cannot be neglected in favour of the role of practice. Instead theory and practice must interact in order to become a material force that is able to defeat Blairism. Hence the activism of Red Flag glosses over the importance of the struggle for socialism as an idea as well as a practice.

The Red Flag platform makes the valid point that we should not wait for the election of 2020 in order to begin the process of political change. They argue that we need to strive in the present in order to develop mass activity against the austerity policy. What they ignore is the role of ideas, which has meant that the general acceptance of austerity is because the Tories are ideologically hegemonic. The views of the government are the common sense of the population despite the discontent indicated over the proposed withdrawal of tax credits. Thus we need to develop popular ideas in favour of socialism, and against austerity, if the practice of mass struggle is to be promoted by the growing credibility of militant action. This process must also involve the undermining of the influence of the trade union bureaucracy which has been effective in bringing about the end of the initial protests against austerity. The point is that a credible programme of action requires a process of protracted ideological struggle if the promotion of a mass movement of opposition to the government is to become real and popular. Unfortunately the activism of the Marxist Left has undermined this development, and instead the complex theoretical aspects of the elements required for successful mass struggle are ignored. This one sidedness is shared by the Red Flag. They do not recognise that an action programme can only succeed if it is complimented by theoretical opposition to bourgeois ideology. The interaction of theory and practice is vital for the development of the class struggle.

Lastly, the Red Flag conflate and combine two contrasting strategies. On the one hand they call for the formation of the left wing Labour government to become a workers government, and on the other hand they call for a mass revolutionary party to lead the struggle against capitalism. This represents indecision rather than strategic clarity. Instead of this confusion they should primarily promote a revolutionary process based on the role of mass struggle and the formation of workers councils. The prospect of the Labour government becoming a workers government is a secondary option that is still very unlikely. We should not absolutely reject this possibility but its prospect is based on circumstances that rely on various hypotheticals. Instead of relying on ‘what could be’, the strategy of revolutionary mass action is sounder and more principled. The very development of class struggle is more likely to realise workers councils, and in this manner an intransigent workers government could be formed. The role of Corbyn is likely to be as an encouragement of change, rather than the agency of change itself.

CONCLUSION

In an important sense what is of vital importance is not the platform of the Red Flag, but instead the issue as to whether Red Flag has become more democratic, open-minded, and receptive to constructive criticism. The Red Flag platform seems to be a step forward in the process of their engagement with the Marxist Left. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. There is much that can be supported in the Red Flag platform. They have recognised that a potential new situation has arisen with the election of Corbyn as leader of the LP. They are attempting to respond to this development with a platform that summarises their politics and its application for Marxism within the LP. In contrast, the Socialist Party and SWP have adopted the dogmatic standpoint that nothing has changed. But if anything, the Red Flag platform expresses complacency about the prospects for change within the LP. They seem to gloss over the difficulties of involved in bringing about a genuine political change within the LP. However, despite their criticisms their platform is a serious contribution concerning principled work within the LP. The test will be whether they are capable of working in a serious and open manner with others in the cause of socialism.