CAN A LABOUR GOVERNMENT EXPRESS ‘ALL POWER TO THE SOVIETS’? BY PHIL SHARPE

Chris Knight argues that just as the Soviets were ultimately accountable to the working class, and so acted under Bolshevik leadership to realise political power, it is also possible to establish similar dynamics in relation to the election of a Labour government that is answerable to mass organisations like the trade unions. There is a potential tension between the official expression of the state in terms of the role of the Constitutional monarchy and on the other hand the Labour government that is based on the influence of the organised working class: “This is an absolute and irreconcilable contradiction, with, on the one hand, the capitalists and their state claiming all ministers as ‘ultimately responsible to the queen in parliament’, and, on the other hand, the organised workers claiming Labour minsters as responsible to themselves and their class.”(1)

But this scenario is generally unrealistic. The various Labour government’s act in a responsible manner, and so do not provide cause for concern to the establishment. They have been prepared to introduce measures such as income policies that have undermined the interests of the workers, and in relation to foreign policy support for NATO and imperialism has been upheld. In contrast, the development of Soviets in 1917 were connected to an ongoing revolutionary situation, and so it was possible to resolve dual power with the realisation of the formation of a Soviet regime. In 1917 the working class and the soldiers recognised the Soviet as an alternative administration, and so did not provide the bourgeois Provisional government with legitimacy. This was precisely why the Bolsheviks raised the call for ‘All Power to the Soviets’. In contrast, a Labour government is elected after a popular vote and is expected to ‘conform to the rules of the game’. This means reforms can be carried out which do not undermine the functioning of capitalism. Generally, the working class has not been radicalised and so has not been unable to challenge this situation. Knight accepts that this has been the general situation, but in a voluntarist manner he makes the call for a Labour government to take the power, and therefore become answerable only to a democratically constituted Labour party conference. He does not explain why a reformist and respectable Labour government would take this radical action. Hence, he does not outline any situation that would create this possibility, and so fails to describe any development of the class struggle that would mean a mass movement would act to put pressure on Labour government to take the power. Instead this perspective is outlined as a good idea. There is no analysis of a possible situation that could alter the balance of class forces and so bring about the pressure of the trade unions on the Labour government to take the power. Possibly the most important omission is that there is a lack of explanation of how the working class would develop a transformed consciousness that would result in this new relationship with the Labour government.

Yet despite these difficulties Knight insists that the Soviets and the Labour Party have similarities in terms of being traditional organisations of the working class.(2) But the difference, which Knight is aware of, is that the Soviets became influenced and ultimately led by the Bolsheviks who had a strategy for revolutionary power. In contrast, the Labour party is primarily led by people who lack any revolutionary aspirations. Jeremy Corbyn can still be defined as a left Social Democrat. The point is that unlike the Soviets, the Labour Party is unlikely to acquire revolutionary leadership. But most importantly, the Labour Party is not an expression of mass popular democracy that would mean it has revolutionary possibilities. Instead it is a party connected to the trade unions, and so has limited aims influenced by the role of the trade union bureaucracy. In some instances this connection is undermined in order that the Labour government can express policies that the trade union leaders do not desire.

Therefore Knight’s claim that there are important similarities between the Soviet Executive Committee of 1917 and the 1969 Labour government is tenuous: “For Marxists the difference in name between the so-called ‘soviet EC’ in Russia 1917 and the so-called Labour government in Britain 1969 is less important than there similarity in class substance. Future historians will see that both were sub-governments trapped beneath the dead weight of a semi-monarchist, semi-feudalist state machine which was the direct instrument of the capitalists and old ruling classes.”(3) But the Soviet EC was characterised by its refusal to take power and so it consciously rejected the possibility to realise the potential of mass popular democracy. In contrast the Labour government was carrying out actions like ‘In Place of Strife’ and the attack on the interests of the trade unions. This Labour government of 1969 could not break with the bourgeoisie because it considered that acting in the ‘national interest’ was the natural policy of the elected party. Its dispute with the Tories concerned what constituted the ‘national interest’, but this ideological standpoint meant no break with the bourgeoisie could be contemplated. Nor did the trade unions have this standpoint. Thus to conceive of the Labour government becoming some form of government of the working class, or Soviet, is a perspective that projects the standpoint of ‘what could be’ onto ‘what is’. Historical experience indicates that the Labour government cannot act like a Soviet and so advance the prospect of revolutionary power. Instead it is dedicated to limiting its aims to what is possible within Parliamentary institutions. This standpoint is also based on a cautious understanding of what the electorate will vote for.

But has the situation changed with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party? Certainly, he is not a traditional Labour leader with its typical reformist preoccupations. It is quite possible that he will encourage the development of a mass movement against austerity and support militant struggles in favour of reforms. But this does not mean supporting the transformation of the Labour government into a Soviet type organisation. The question of how far a Corbyn government will go depends on the influence of revolutionary forces. Consequently, the success of the vision of democratic socialism will depend on the role of Marxism, and only with this development would the Labour government become truly accountable to the mass organisations of the working class. But what is most important concerns developments within the working class. If the workers become radicalised by the prospect of a Corbyn government, and this is translated into the creation of Soviet type organs, then it is possible that ambitious change can be contemplated. If this transformation of class consciousness does not occur, then it is entirely possible that the Corbyn government becomes just the latest type of moderate and traditionally reformist administration. Possibilities depend on the intensification of the class struggle. If this does not occur then the pressures to conform will dilute the ambitions of any Corbyn government.

Knight address the above objections in terms of suggesting that All Power to the Labour government means all Power to the revolutionary working class, which is identical to calling for Soviet power based on the influence of the Bolsheviks: “All Power to the Labour government means, for the Marxist vanguard, all power to ‘us’, i.e., to the working class as a whole, to a revolutionised movement, which will take power in the name of the Labour government, and will, once power is actually in its hands, thereby find itself in a position to ignore the so-called ‘Labour’ ministers of the queen and constitute itself the Labour government. But this is only the long-term meaning.”(4) This would seem the ideal scenario. The mobilisation of the revolutionary working class in order to enforce its conception of what is meant by a Labour government. But this is not Knight’s immediate perspective, instead he calls for the Wilson government of 1969 to take the power. This is a foolish standpoint based on a false analogy between 1917 and 1969. In 1917 it would have been perfectly possible for the Soviet Executive Committee to seize power. This action would have the support of the working class organised in Soviets, and who did not recognise the authority of the Provisional government. In contrast, the Labour government of 1969 is answerable to Parliament, and does not contemplate any radical change. Furthermore, there is no mass pressure to seize political power. Instead the discontent of sections of the working class with the performance of the Labour government results in votes for the Conservatives, who form a government in 1970. It would require the development of a genuine pre-revolutionary situation based on radical discontent for the Labour government to even contemplate the seizure of political power. But this is not what is occurring. Instead the situation is characterised by a right-wing mood that results in the election of the Conservatives in 1970. Thus the comparison between 1917 and 1969 is ludicrous. The Soviet Executive Committee is called upon to take the power because that is the view of increasingly revolutionary minded workers in Russia. But the Labour government of 1969 is not some Soviet type organisation, and the working class is not in a revolutionary mood. The demand ‘All Power to the Labour government’ has no relationship to the actual balance of forces.

The point is that the issue at dispute is not just about the differences between the character of the Soviets and the Labour government. Instead what is crucial is that the political situations are different. In 1917 there was a revolutionary situation that was expressed by increasing support for the Bolsheviks and decreasing confidence in the Provisional government. The working class had become receptive to the strategy of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. In contrast, there has never been an occasion in which the situation had matured for the Labour government to act like a Soviet, and this is because of the lack of a developing revolutionary situation. The compromises that the Executive Committee of the Soviets made with the Provisional Government do not make this organ similar to the limitations of a Labour government. Instead the difference is that the Executive Committee of the Soviet is carrying out policies of opportunist compromise that only antagonise an increasingly militant working class. This point can be made about the official Soviet support for the continuation of the imperialist war. The most conscious sections of the working class were antagonised by this expression of opportunism and they increasingly become supporters of the Bolsheviks. The culmination of the process was the July days when the Soviet Executive opposed the demands of the politicised working class to take the power. These developments could only enhance Bolshevik influence and result in the Bolshevik majority in the Soviets by August.

This revolutionary situation has never been repeated in the UK, not even during the general strike of 1926. In this event, the Councils of Action were in their infancy, and the Labour Party acted to try and moderate developments, arguing for conciliation and the ending of the dispute. Most crucially, the Communist Party was small and its leadership had been imprisoned. There has never been the development of dual power in the UK which would promote the possibility of the credibility of the perspective of Soviet power. Instead of taking these differences into account, Knight argues that the Labour government can act as a Soviet type administration: “Despite the fact that the Labour government, and to a lesser extent the Labour Party NEC and the TUC, are all organs collaborating with the ruling class, we nevertheless are obliged to demand the transfer of all industry and power from the ruling class to these organs as potential state organs of the working class.”(5) Indeed he argues that without the TUC and LP the possibility of the political power of the working class would be impossible: “The decisive fact about Britain’s TUC and Labour Party structures is this: that they are potential organs of state power for the British working class. Were it not for these organs, the seizure of power and the retention of power by the British working class would be an impossibility.”(6)

These claims and demands are not credible. The Labour Party and TUC cannot become the expression of the political power of the working class because of their character and history. This is unlikely to change as long as the working class is not radicalised and so is unable or unwilling to challenge for state power. But if there is an intensification of the class struggle it is possible, indeed necessary, that soviet type organs be created in order to express the revolutionary power of the working class. Historical experience would indicate that the Labour Party and TUC would act as a reactionary influence. Far from taking the power, they would try and persuade people that the overthrow of state power would be a disaster, and so the act of revolution should be rejected. However, there are possible exceptional situations, in these instances the LP and TUC may act differently. We cannot rule out the development of a connection between the LP and TUC and the revolutionary process. But we cannot orientate ourselves to an exceptional possibility. Instead we have to emphasise what is more likely to occur. If a revolutionary situation does develop it is because of the influence of a Marxist party, and the fact that the working class has become radicalised by mass struggle. In this context, ‘All Power to the LP and TUC’ would act as a distraction. Instead our strategy has to be realistic and based on what is likely to happen. Indeed our immediate primary task is to promote change from the present situation of demoralisation and instead advocate militant struggles based on the formation of a mass movement. Only success in this regard can indicate what could become appropriate slogans about governmental power. But to suggest that the LP is a potential Soviet is not only an example of formal reasoning, it also ignores the differences between what had already become a revolutionary situation in 1917 and the effectively non-revolutionary character of British politics. The possibility that the LP could become a Soviet power could only arise in a unique revolutionary situation, as in Germany 1918. But it was interesting that the Social Democrats, the equivalent of the LP, preferred to uphold the role of the National Assembly and downgraded the importance of the workers councils. We could expect similar actions by the LP in any revolutionary situation in the UK. If it acted differently and promoted Soviets, this would be an action that did not correspond with the moderate history of the LP.

Indeed, Knight admits to real differences between the UK, which has had a stable history of bourgeois democracy, and the more revolutionary possibilities of Soviet democracy in 1905 and 1917. But he then tries to overcome these differences by claiming that the Soviets and the LP have an equivalent role: “Where the potential state organs of the Russian working class were the Soviets, those of the British working class are the organisations of the trade unions and Labour party.”(7) The conclusion is that the working class in the UK will have to take power through the organs of the Labour movement. The problem is that these organs as they are presently constituted are reformist and so are unwilling to even contemplate becoming the agency of revolution. Only the transformation of these organisations would create the possibility that this reformist history could be both undermined and challenged. But it entirely conceivable, and preferable, that the working class creates new organs of struggle that could promote the struggle for revolutionary power. Instead Knight has the ‘hope’ that the LP and trade unions will become these instruments of revolution. But he is not able to indicate any concrete experience that would uphold his standpoint. Instead he can only support his view with a wish, but this wish does not result in fulfilment.

In the present the LP is still dominated by a reactionary right wing, and the trade unions are restricted in their activity by a passive and conservative leadership. However, the election of Corbyn may create the possibilities to transform this situation of demoralised inaction. But if this prospect is to occur, it may still mean that workers have to be prepared to act outside the limitations of their traditional organisations. Thus the slogan ‘Labour to Power’ will be a distraction. Instead we need a more ambitious strategy that attempts to overcome the very inertia imposed by the LP and TUC. This does not mean that we should dogmatically reject any possibility of advancing ‘Labour to Power’. The point about what are the likely slogans and policies have to be conditioned by the lessons of historical experience. We cannot base our perspectives on abstract potentialities. The LP has never acted like a Soviet, and possibly never will. On the other hand it would be inflexible to dismiss this possibility under a novel situation in which the LP did respond to the mass movement of workers. Hence we have to create a strategy that is based on the lessons of history, whilst preparing for any unexpected twist and turn. What would be unexpected would be the LP becoming an agency of the revolutionary process. We would welcome this development.

Knight’s original article was written when the importance of the TUC and LP seem to be pre-eminent. Since then other popular organisations have emerged, and the neo-liberal offensive has asked serious questions about the significance of traditional reformist parties and trade unions. The confidence in the role of the working class movement has been undermined by the success of the ruling class attempt to decrease the influence of the trade unions. Consequently instead of asking abstract and futuristic questions about ‘Labour Taking Power’ it would be more relevant to ask how can we oppose the austerity policy and enhance class consciousness. Then from small beginning’s we can ask more ambitious questions about how to achieve revolutionary power.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) Chris Knight: All Power to the Labour Government: In Weekly Worker, September 24th 2015, number 1075 p10

(2) ibid p10

(3) ibid p10

(4) ibid p11

(5) Chris Knight: Soviets and the Labour Party part two, in Weekly Worker, October 8th, number 1077 p8

(6) ibid p8-9

(7) ibid p9