CHAPTER FIVE: THE PARTY AND PROGRAMME IN THE ERA OF GLOBALISATION

The demise of the cold war era was connected to the offensive of capital represented by the Thatcher and Reagan regimes. Thatcherism represented the aim to undermine and replace the post-war settlement of the welfare state as the basis of capital accumulation with the increased importance of the market, finance and the coercive state. This meant the influence of the trade unions would be undermined and the role of the national economy would be subject increasingly to the imperatives of the competitive character of the global economy. The Reagan administration also shared these objectives and it also had the aim to restore the hegemony of the USA within international relations. Consequently the USA increased its expenditure on arms in order to increase the pressures on the Soviet economy. International tensions had already been increased because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the USA acted in order to facilitate a military defeat of the USSR and to bring about its withdrawal from this country. It was argued by some Marxists that this development indicated that the increased tensions in the cold war were an expression of the logic of international class struggle. The USSR was portrayed as being the expression of socialism that was in conflict with the forces of reaction and capitalism.(1) Hence what was defined as the Second cold war was the distinct representation of the class struggle. However if this standpoint was to have credibility the offensive of capital against labour would be detrimental to the interests of the USSR. This was not apparent because the USSR was also interested in the intensification of the discipline of labour within the production process. The USSR was in favour of the dynamism of capitalism because it hoped to benefit from this situation by increased trade and financial support. This meant the opposition of the USSR directed against capitalism was because of its imperative to expand the strength and size of the Soviet bloc. The USSR was antagonistic towards the USA at the level of international relations but this did not mean that it had a perspective of international proletarian revolution. Instead the USSR wanted to stabilise international relations in a manner that was more favourable to itself. The USSR desired the continuation of détente in favourable terms and based on the international recognition of its recent process of expansion. But the aim of the USA was to reduce the size and influence of the Soviet bloc and this explained the effective demise of détente and the onset of the new cold war. The USSR was not an ally of the international working class because of the re-development of cold war, and was still opposed to genuine proletarian revolution. Thus the approach of the Marxists who define the cold war as an expression of international class struggle was based on the illusion that the USSR was a form of socialism and therefore favourably inclined to support the advance of the class struggle. The actual situation was dictated by the geo-political imperatives of the USSR which led to conflict with the USA.

E.P Thompson was principled to argue that the international peace movement should develop an approach that was independent from the standpoint of the USSR. The supporters of opposition to nuclear arms should oppose the attempts of both the USA and the USSR to intensify tensions within Europe.(2) In contrast to this approach many Trotskyist groups defended the USSR in the new cold war. They could recognise the aggressive character of imperialism but did not understand the expansionist impulses of the USSR. These groups were often unprepared for the offensive of capital against labour. Some organisations did not understand how important the miner’s strike of 1984-85 was for the future of capitalism. Victory for the ruling class enabled it to restructure British capitalism in accordance with the neo-liberal agenda of finance capital and to undermine the political importance of the trade unions. These developments were connected to the end of Stalinist control of Eastern Europe and the demise of the USSR which promoted the formation of a truly global world economy. The era of effective national trade union struggles seem to have come to an end because of the increasing development of an inter-dependent world economy and the frequent process of the movement of capital. Thus the trade unions and the socialist organisations would have to replace what had been effectively national programmes for the progress of the working class with the development of an international programme of the transition to communism. However many political organisations were unsuited to the challenges posed by this situation because they refused to acknowledge how the various defeats in the class struggle had transformed the class struggle. They clung to notions of the undefeated working class and refused to accept the strategic importance of the defeat of the miners.(3)

One attempt to provide a new programme for the contemporary period was outlined by Workers Press in the mid 1990’s. This was entitled: “A New Party for Socialism”, and it was written by Cliff Slaughter.(4) He argues that the Labour party in the 1990’s has finally renounced any affinity for the goal of socialism and has accepted uncritical adaptation to capitalism. Furthermore, Stalinism is in chronic crisis because of the demise of the USSR and is unable to promote any viable alternative to capitalism. But the process of class struggle is increasing in intensity and it will provide the conditions for the formation of a new party of the working class. He insists that this party will not arise because of the role of propaganda and proclamation: “It can come into existence only on the basis of big movements, mass struggles and big shocks.”(5) Slaughter seems to have established the connection between the onset of globalisation and the rejection of any relation of the traditional parties of the working class with either socialism or reformism. These parties have become technocratic supporters of uncritical adaptation to the interests of capitalism, and are supporting the ruling class in the rejection of the welfare state and the acceptance of the neo-liberal agenda. Hence these parties have nothing to offer the working class except their distinct role as being the most efficient managers of the capitalist system. This will meant that they will oppose the demands of the working class for social improvements and material gains. In general terms this approach is valid and explains the generation of antagonistic relations between the parties of Social Democracy and the working class. But his standpoint does not allow for the possibility of boom that enabled Social Democracy to generate social prosperity whilst still opposing the interests of the working class. He is also premature in predicting that the trade unions would come into conflict with the new form of Social Democracy. The trade unions were reluctant to break with Social Democracy, and the result was that major class conflicts did not generally arise during the period of New Labour rule. Consequently this meant Slaughter’s prediction that the forces of the New Party would arise because of the increased frequency and intensity of struggles was problematical. However this does not mean that it is premature to argue for a new party of the working class. This is because the central point is not that a new party is necessitated by struggle in and of itself and is instead an expression of the imperatives produced by the crisis of working class politics and the necessity of the renewed programmatic expression of the interests of working people.

What is meant by this evaluation? The very historical connection between the working class and its political expression is being undermined by the actions of New Labour. Historically the Labour party has been based on the importance of reforms and the modification of capitalism in the interests of working people. This aim has often proved to be illusory and the role of the Labour party has been to act as the pragmatic manger of capitalism. However the aspect of reformist theory and its vague connection to socialism is now being totally rejected in terms of the emphasis on the role of the Labour party as the organisers of capitalism. The interests of working people are to be subordinated to this aim and role, and therefore the historical connection with reformism is to be totally rejected. Thus the working class is being asked to support the Labour Party because it is potentially superior to the Conservative party in the management of capitalism. Social improvement is rejected as being anachronistic in relation to the contemporary development of capitalism, and therefore the Labour party is rejecting its professed role to act as the expression of the interests of the working class. Hence working people no longer have an instrument of possible political expression and the programme of reformism has been rejected by what was a reformist organisation. Logically the trade unions should have concluded, as Slaughter argues, that the Labour party no longer acts in any sense in the interests of the working class. However this process did not happen despite this apparent rejection of reformism by the Labour Party. But this reactionary development still indicates the necessity of a new party because of the fact that Social Democracy cannot uphold its historical relationship to reformism. Thus in a dialectical manner a new party is required because only a revolutionary party can uphold the importance of reforms and establish their relation to the advance of the class struggle and the prospect of making progress towards communism. Furthermore, the very reactionary regression of Social Democracy is an important aspect of why a new programme is required in order to explain this situation and articulate the increased urgency for the working class to develop means of its political expression.

But Slaughter’s approach was proved to be complacent when he suggested that struggles would form the basis of the new party of the working class. Struggles can obviously contribute to the process of encouragement of the formation of something new, but they cannot be the cause. This is because particular struggles, or strikes, cannot spontaneously generate the necessary class consciousness that would result in the conclusion that a new political organisation should be formed or supported. Instead existing groups of Marxists should provide important arguments as to why the particular struggle should contribute to the process of development of the new working class party, and they should also outline why the reactionary regression of the Labour party provides additional urgency for the realisation of this task. The point is not that the various struggles are not important for the prospect of the formation of the new party, but that these struggles in and of themselves will not resolve the realisation of this task. Indeed it could be argued that the very unity of the Marxists forces could provide the impetus to the creation of the new party. Hence the formation of the Socialist Alliance could have provided this role if it was not for the fact that the Socialist Alliance was undermined by the sectional actions of the Socialist Party and the SWP. The Socialist Alliance had the potential to become a pole of attraction for the various struggles, and to express discontent with capitalism in an organisational form. In this sense the creation of the party would represent the unification of already expressed political and organisational possibilities with the dynamism of new developments. But if Marxism represents important political and organisational limitations, which was apparent with the effective demise of the Socialist Alliance, the potential to create a new party was not realised. The struggles in themselves did not have sufficient political consciousness to advance the formation of a party.

In other words, the problem with Slaughter’s approach to party building is that he assumes in an idealist manner that the various struggles will provide their own logic for the resolution of this organisational and political task. But whilst the struggles can contribute the support needed for the development of a party it is also vital that Marxists can provide the initiative to advance this process in terms of organisational cohesion and programmatic progress. Hence there is an irreducible propaganda aspect to the formation of the new party of the working class. In a paradoxical manner, Slaughter is making his own propaganda contribution and distinctive arguments to this process. He is indicating that the historical failure of Social Democracy contributes to the necessity to develop a new party of the working class. The actual prospect of success in this aim will represent the interaction of propaganda and practice, or the role of struggle. To over-emphasise any one of these aspects will represent one-sidedness and the denial of a distinctive aspect of party building. It is also necessary to indicate that the prediction of the intensification of struggle by Slaughter for the future of a New Labour government was generally not substantiated. Hence empirical reality itself would indicate the necessity of a different understanding of the process of party building. It is also important to acknowledge that it was the lack of unity between the various Marxist groups that was of crucial importance for undermining the prospect of the creation of a new party of the working class in this period. Marxist organisation was itself part of the problem because of organisational conservatism and sectarianism and because of a pessimistic underestimation of the possibility to create a new mass party because of the right-wing trajectory of Social Democracy. The result of this situation was a political vacuum and this meant an alternative to New Labour and Social Democracy was not developed. The various struggles could have acquired revolutionary dimensions if there was a distinct Marxist organisation for them to relate to. Instead Marxism remained fragmented and so it seemed that people could advance their interests by support for pressure group politics like the anti-war movement.

Slaughter argued that the reactionary regression of Social Democracy, combined with the demise of Stalinism, will result in mass struggles because these traditional organisations will no longer prove effective in undermining class conflict. New Labour will preside over the process of opposition to the working class that will result in new radical struggles and provide the basis for the development of the new party. The period of isolation of Trotskyism will be over. However this isolation of Marxism and Trotskyism actually intensified because the ideology that working class struggle was over undermined the process of mass mobilisation and disorientated the various Marxist groups. In this situation Marxism organisations continued to fragment and split and the various struggles that did develop actually contributed to the sense that the historical role of the working class was finished. Hence the apparent success of the anti-war movement in 2003 was because it was apparently based on a diversity of social forces and was focused on one issue which was the intervention of the USA and the UK into Iraq. Marxism was not able to regain its strength and relevance because of this struggle and instead was reduced in importance, and even the SWP which had an important organisational role in the anti-war movement was not able to thrive and provide effective political leadership. Instead it became part of a popular front and adapted to this situation in right-wing and populist terms. Consequently the demise of Stalinism and the transformation of Social Democracy did not revitalise Marxism despite important struggles against the policies of New Labour. Instead these struggles occurred in an ideological atmosphere that the historical importance of the working class was over and the relevance of Marxism was finished. Thus Slaughter’s prediction that the period of New Labour would end the isolation of Trotskyism was empirically falsified. It was important to acknowledge that the onset of new struggles could actually intensify the isolation of Marxism and these struggles did not provide for the mass growth of Marxism. The participants of the various struggles actually spontaneously concluded that they did not require political organisation to further their aims and the result was the actual promotion of the crisis of Marxism.

In other words actual developments indicated that Slaughter’s prediction that the effective crisis of the traditional mass organisations of the working class would be progressively resolved by the formation of a new working class party and the growth in the influence of Marxism was shown to be falsified by events. He contended that: “But now, unless the Marxists can immerse themselves in the movements, the struggles, the thinking, of all those driven into action by the universal crisis of capitalist economy, society and culture, they have no future, only a noble past.”(6) His approach is similar to those that call for adaptation to the various mass movements in the past, he advocates opposition to intervening in struggles, and instead is for activity that will make them successful. The problem with this approach is that the apparent endorsement of the dilution of programme does not actually guarantee the success of Marxism. On the basis of crass opportunism the SWP was able to acquire an influential role in the anti-war movement of 2003, and it effectively rejected any reference to socialism in order to enhance the prestige and influence of the mass movement. However this did not generate its growth and instead its influence actually dwindled. Neither, the SWP and Workers Press could challenge the spontaneous logic of the various struggles which was to consider Marxism to have become antiquated. The supporters of Workers Press became advisors to the Dockers in Liverpool on the basis that the importance of the Marxist programme had become irrelevant and instead the struggle itself provided its own sufficient affirmation of principles and strategy. This very role of Workers Press seemed to question the importance of a party rather than confirm the necessity for the development of the revolutionary party. Hence the WRP – Workers Press went along with the spontaneous logic of the struggle and adapted to the view that Marxism was no longer important at the level of strategy and organisation.

Therefore the actual dynamism of struggles against New Labour intensified rather than resolved the issue of the crisis of leadership within the working class. The very character of the struggles seemed to confirm the view that the importance of revolutionary politics, party and programme was no longer required and the approach of the various Marxist organisations was to adapt to rather than challenge this apparent prevailing mood. The result was that the struggles did not overcome the isolation of Marxism and instead intensified the situation of marginalisation. Nor did the process of mass mobilisation resolve the ideological view that the historical role of the working class was over in a progressive manner. Instead the character of the struggles seemed to confirm this ideological view. Consequently, Slaughter’s view that struggles would resolve all outstanding theoretical and practical issues in progressive terms was also apparently refuted by events. Marxism never seemed more isolated and irrelevant and communism seemed to have been discredited at the level of theory and practice. In a sense Slaughter was trying to suggest that struggles would resolve all outstanding theoretical questions. But in actuality the struggles not only did not resolve theoretical questions and actually created new theoretical issues related to the apparent complete marginalisation of Marxism. The role of practice was to create new theoretical issues, and so this complex situation refuted the perspective of Slaughter and led to a crisis within his organisation. What had become apparent was that the end of Stalinism and the reactionary transformation of Social Democracy would not usher in an era of revolutionary Marxism. Instead this situation only contributed to the crisis of Marxism and provided challenges for its programme and perspectives. This situation had an objective material basis because the onset of globalisation led to the increased expansion and greater profitability of the system and this meant concessions could still be made to the working class. Hence in practice reformism was still being utilised despite the theoretical and ideological rejection of reformism. Thus it was not surprising that traditional forms of class struggle were being replaced by different forms of struggles that seemed to have little relation to the role of the working class and socialism. In a paradoxical manner these new struggles did not challenge the hegemony of New Labour and instead called for it to modify its politics. Thus the very dynamism of these struggles upheld the role of ethical protest rather than create new forms of justification of revolutionary politics. The domination of New Labour was not undermined because of these characteristics of the various struggles.

Slaughter assumed that the regression and decline of Social Democracy and Stalinism would mean that the working class would be able to make progress in the class struggle and increasingly challenge capitalism. Hence he was unable to anticipate that actual events would result in a different situation. If consciousness had corresponded to reality the working class would have been encouraged by the demise of Stalinism to become more ambitious and audacious in opposing capitalism. Instead the downfall of Stalinism led to confusion and promoted the view that capitalism could not be overthrown. The prospect of mass mobilisation by the working class was also discredited because the trade union bureaucracy accepted the instructions of the Social Democratic leaders not to engage in militant action. Only a few unions defied this instruction and the result was that the class struggle was at a low level. This meant the process of popular struggle occurred outside of the activity of the labour movement such as the anti-war movement. It is conceivable that this development could have led to new forms of influence for Marxism, but this did not happen because the participants in the mass mobilisation were indifferent to Marxism and rejected its attempt to acquire a leadership role. Thus the various struggles that developed did not promote the influence of Marxism and instead Marxism seemed to have become irrelevant and marginalised by the very character and aims of the mass struggle. This meant the popular struggle against war could not promote the formation of a new working class party and did not result in support for a Marxist programme. The perspective of Slaughter was undermined by the actual developments and the inability of Marxism to overcome the ideological mood that the prospects for socialism were finished. Consequently the actual struggles that developed lacked any ambitions of realising an alternative society and instead aimed to bring about an end to the condition of war within capitalism. In this situation Marxism needed to strengthen its theory in order to develop new arguments about its relevance, and to outline why the perspective that socialism could not be realised was a premature and one-sided standpoint.

The point is that it was reasonable for Slaughter to argue that the demise of Stalinism and the reactionary transformation of Social Democracy would create favourable conditions for the growth of a mass revolutionary party. This approach was the traditional view of Trotskyism, and it was based on the understanding that the strength of Social Democracy and Stalinism undermined the development of an alternative revolutionary form of Marxism. What this approach could not comprehend was that many people identified Stalinism and Social Democracy as being socialist and therefore Trotskyism was part of the same current. Hence the decline of the two main variants of what was perceived as socialist also created problems for Trotskyism, and so it did not benefit from the crisis of the former expressions of mass working class opinion. In order that Trotskyism did not become part of the ideological crisis of Stalinism and Social Democracy it was necessary to revise the optimistic perspective that a mass revolutionary party could be created in the short-term. Instead it was important to recognise that the political conditions were not favourable for the development of a revolutionary party, and this was because the very success of globalisation promoted the objective and subjective conditions for the majority of people to support capitalism. Globalisation indicated that capitalism could still expand and promote profitability and prosperity, and this suggested socialism was an inferior form of society. Marxists had to develop the arguments as to why this period could not last and would be replaced by crisis and tensions. Instead of this type of revision Marxism seemed to be dogmatic because it often denied the importance of globalisation and insisted that the optimistic perspectives if had developed did not need to be revised. The resulting adherence to dogma had little relation to reality, and so created crisis and the rejection of theoretical understanding of the period.

The basis of Slaughter’s approach is that increasing economic crisis since the 1970’s has undermined the possibilities for reformism. Capitalism can only support measures that undermine the standard of living and erode the welfare state. This situation is different to the past when the imperialist power of the UK upheld the possibility for concessions and the creation of the welfare state. Hence the role of New Labour will be to introduce the measures that uphold the interests of capital and undermine the social situation of the working class. The result will be intensified class struggle and the political conditions will be created for the working class to break with the Labour party and create a new organisation that upholds its interests. In practice he is suggesting that the Labour party will no longer be able to act as a bourgeois workers party that can act on behalf of the working class because of mass pressure and the economic situation: “A future Labour government will conduct the offensive which capital requires against the working class and against all the conditions it has won in the past.”(7) The very actions of the Labour government will polarise the relations between classes and generate mass movements of struggle against its measures. Hence the situation will be favourable for the formation of a new working class party.

This perspective was reasonable in relation to the actual knowledge of the economic situation and an understanding of the intentions and policies of New Labour. However despite these credible assumptions about what would happen, the actual developments differed from these predictions. It is crucial to understand that despite the reactionary character of New Labour the break between it in government and the working class never occurred. This was because the period could be characterised as a mini-boom that enabled limited concessions to be made to the working class such as the introduction of tax credits, the minimum wage, improvement of the NHS, and better nursery school provision. Consequently even though New Labour had rejected the ideology of reformism it was still able to act in a limited reformist manner. This situation was sufficient to ensure that the trade union bureaucracy maintained close relations with the government. The consequence of this development was that the prospects of mass struggles was stifled and undermined. Trade Unions never became oppositional and determined to promote an offensive against New Labour. In a limited manner it seemed that New Labour was still upholding the traditional programme of reformism in terms of defence of the public sector and the welfare state. Slaughter could not anticipate this situation because he equated the ideology of New Labour with the necessity of a new offensive against the working class. This offensive never happened because of the fiscal measures of New Labour and the utilisation of cheap credit in order to compensate for the slow rise in wages. Budgetary measures were able to obscure the overall weakness of British capitalism, and promoted the illusion that the interests of capital and labour were similar and not opposed. This did not mean that discontent with New Labour did not develop but it did not originate with the Labour movement. Instead tensions arose because of the support given by New Labour to the USA intervention in Iraq. It is possible that this could have become the basis to challenge the reactionary character of New Labour but this situation did not develop because of the limitations of the mass movement. The issue of socialism versus capitalism did not arise because the political situation seemed to be about the ethics of peace versus war and militarism. Consequently mass mobilisation did not assume a classical class struggle form. The very importance of this type of struggle did not make the importance of a new working class party a topical issue. Furthermore the prospect of the formation of a new party was undermined by the split within the Socialist Alliance.

Slaughter outlines how historically the labour movement has been demarcated between the political and economic. The Labour party has concentrated on issues of politics and the state and the trade unions have emphasised the importance of economic issues. This division has undermined the working class being able to unite around the political task involved in the overthrow of the capitalist state and the formation of a society based on the interests of the associated producers. The working class has the capacity to develop a society based on the achievements of technology and economic progress, but this potential is undermined by the rigid differentiation between the role of the political and the economic. New Labour has carried this division to the extreme and has openly declared that it will rule in the interests of capital and the Labour movement should accept this situation. However this division of the working class into different economic and political spheres only had a limited historical plausibility for the period of reformism. But in the present period the working class will resist the attempts of New Labour to undermine its class interests and will act to oppose the support of the trade union bureaucracy for the Labour government. The possibilities will be created for the formation of a new party of the working class because of these contradictions and the intensification of class conflict.

In general terms, Slaughter has outlined a principled perspective concerning how the relationship between New Labour and the working class could develop to the point of a historic split. But this perspective was falsified by actual events. The ideological attempt of New Labour to make the working class accept its subordinated position within capitalist society did have the potential for massive rebellion. But for the reasons already outlined this rebellion did not occur. This was primarily because the trade union bureaucracy was successful in obtaining the support of the working class for the reactionary programme of New Labour. The potential for rebellion was also neutralised by the effects of a mini boom and an unprecedented access to credit which created the illusion that the good times of the 1960’s were being repeated. New Labour was prepared for confrontation with the working class and this was why it retained the anti trade union legislation of previous Tory governments. It was not necessary to utilise this legislation, and instead the government could appeal to the reformist past of the Labour Party in order to justify its actions. Consequently it was not the ideology of New Labour that prevented conflict between itself and the working class but rather the material conditions of the boom enabled concessions to be made that prevented the prospect of confrontation between the government and the working class. Slaughter is unable to explain this possibility because he underestimates the possibility for globalisation to generate boom and relative material prosperity. Hence his lack of an analysis of globalisation explains why he can only conceive a situation of increasing class conflict and the development of a split between New Labour and the working class. Essentially he has an economic catastrophist approach that can only conceive of the situation in terms of crisis and the related prospects of political tension between New Labour and the working class. But the actual tendency for recession in the period between the 1990’s and the end of the period of the Labour government was outweighed by the situation of boom. This enabled the Labour party to make the necessary concessions that ensured that mass struggles did not occur. Thus the actual outbreak of popular struggle concerned the foreign policy of New Labour and was not directly connected to economic issues. It could also be argued that this discontent was primarily an expression of the moral conscience of the young and so did not influence and undermine the effective alliance between New Labour and the working class.

Nevertheless despite the falsification of Slaughter’s perspectives he has outlined important arguments as to why the working class is unable to become a revolutionary class. The apparent division between the political and the economic means that the mass strength of the working class is limited to economic issues that are not meant to acquire a political aspect and become a challenge to the authority of the state. Instead the authority of the political is projected onto the role of the Labour party and this means the legitimising of the authority of the bourgeois state and the continuation of capitalism in economic terms. Only when the division between the economic and political is ended will the working class reclaim its ability to act in order to oppose the domination of the bourgeois state and the continuation of the capital-labour relation. However this means the establishment of a new party that would not uphold the division between the economic and political. Hence a party established by the trade union bureaucracy would not represent progress and instead reproduces the limitations of the past. Instead an entirely new party is required that would reflect the attempt of the various struggles to go beyond the limitations of capitalism. The problem with what is effectively a principled approach is, firstly, the issue of the development of class consciousness also depends on the capacity to understand social reality in an accurate manner. This is not provided by the superficial optimism of Slaughter’s approach. Secondly, we can envisage a situation in which the creation of a new party by the trade unions could be an advance and not reproduce the traditional divide between the role of economic s and politics. The formation of this party could be an expression of the logic of the class struggle and the related disappointment with New Labour. It could be argued that the present period of austerity is creating the conditions for this type of development.

Ultimately the problem with Slaughter’s approach is that he imposes a conception of what he would like reality to be onto reality itself. This is why he predicts massive confrontations between the working class and New Labour even though the situation is still favourable for the prospect of the consolidation of the political relationship between these social forces. He can only envisage the deepening of crisis that would create splits between the working class and New Labour and so he cannot anticipate the prospect of boom that would encourage political unity. This error is not untypical of the Marxist left of this period and it is an expression of the underestimation of the capacity of globalisation to enhance the development of the productive forces and the fact that this situation results in the relative renewal of the approach of Social Democracy. New Labour is able to carry out its programme without conflict because its anti-working class agenda is obscured by the capacity to generate material concessions to working people. The rejection of the traditional policies of Social Democracy by New Labour is made possible by the favourable economic situation and the ability to carry out limited measures in the interests of the working class. This situation is not anticipated by Slaughter because of his adherence to economic dogma and the view that capitalism is in a process of irreversible decline. But globalisation indicates that the conception of decline has to be modified and related to the ability for further economic upswings to occur. Only then can we understand why the period of New Labour government did not result in massive confrontations with the working class. Hence at the level of credible economic theory and philosophical materialism the tentative alliance between New Labour and the working class was entirely understandable. But this situation could not have been anticipated by the economic dogma and philosophical idealism of Slaughter. The possibility to analyse class relations in an objective manner calls for the development of an understanding of globalisation and the revision of the timeless truisms of Marxist political economy.

Slaughter insists that the process of the reconstruction of the trade unions and the development of a party is the task of the working class: “Such a party will not be controlling and manipulating the workers and unions from outside, but will lead the fight for internationalism and socialism inside the class movement of the working class.”(8) It is true that the aim of Marxists is to promote a mass party that is composed of workers and which will be democratic and based on their aspirations and interests. But who can create this party? The dynamic of struggle will not necessarily generate a spontaneous logic of progress towards the realisation of this type of party by the actions of the working class. Instead the people who initially argue and articulate the necessity of a new party of the working class will be the existing forces of Marxism. They will have the possible arguments in favour of the creation of a new party and be aware of the limitations of the past such as elitism, bureaucracy and the political flaws of opportunism and ultra-leftism. The result of this recognition of the importance of the formation of a party of the working class was the creation of the Socialist Alliance in the period of the government of New Labour. It represented the coming together of a number of Marxist organisations, and had the potential to become a party. The Socialist Alliance could have represented a pole of attraction for the working class in struggle and to any individuals disaffected with the limitations of New Labour. The organisation was created in the period of the discontent created by the war of intervention in Iraq, and was based on a socialist programme that could have provided a strategy for the mobilisation of the working class against New Labour. However the Socialist Alliance project resulted in failure not because of a lack of support from the working class but instead because some of the organisations split and the result was its demise. But the reasons for the formation of the Alliance in the first place, the necessity of a political alternative to New Labour still existed. None of the individual groups could express the overall interests of the working class and the desire for a new party, and therefore the cause of the formation of a Marxist party was undermined by the fragmentation of the Socialist Alliance.

If the perspective of Slaughter had come to fruition, that the working class had been able to form a socialist party, the forces of what became the DSA would have welcomed this development. This is why we supported the various initiatives of the Liverpool dock workers that represented the potential for the formation of this type of organisation. But the result of their actions was not the formation of the forces of a new party, and the other various struggles could not generate the conscious and activity that was able to promote the development of a socialist organisation. This was not surprising because of the low level of struggles and the fact that the predicted confrontation between the working class and New Labour did not occur. Hence for these reasons it was the responsibility of Marxists to take action that would generate the possibility of the formation of a Socialist Party. Partial success was achieved to the extent that the Socialist Alliance was formed. But the ultimate result was failure because the various organisations were dismayed by the disappointing electoral results of the Alliance and some of the component parts were ever properly committed to the success of the organisation. The potential was created for a Marxist organisation to relate to struggles but this potential was never realised primarily because the SWP believed better organisational gains could be realised by splitting from the Alliance. Hence the legacy of sectarianism conflicted with the possibilities represented by unity. The possibility to develop a socialist organisation that could relate to working class struggle was undermined by the very self serving actions of some of the Marxist groups within the Alliance.

It was possibly because of these types of sectarian flaws that Slaughter called for the formation of a new party by the working class. Implicitly he is suggesting that the working class would not have the same organisational limitations as the various Marxist groups and so would be more seriously committed to the success of a socialist party. The very history of the Socialist Alliance would seem to confirm this argument, the role of Marxist groups in trying to create a party was characterised by the problems of sectarianism and the lack of serious commitment to the aim of developing a socialist organisation. But his argument is also flawed by the fact that no working class struggle has created sufficient consciousness and commitment to the aim of developing a socialist party. Consequently despite the faults of the Marxist groups it is still their responsibility to take initiatives that could result in the formation of a new mass socialist party. This is why the DSA calls for the formation of a worker’s party, and we believe that the period of austerity and crisis has created the most favourable conditions to realise this possibility. Thus it could be argued that the actual period of New Labour government was unfavourable for the generation of the prospect of the formation of a new socialist party. The lack of working class struggles did undermine the prospect to create a successful and credible socialist organisation. In this context, Slaughter is possibly right to insist that the development of struggles provides a favourable situation for the formation of a new socialist organisation. This is because a crucial role of this organisation will be to provide a credible strategy and perspective for the progress of these struggles and recruitment will be the result of the activity of struggle. In the absence of struggle Marxist attempts to create a credible new organisation are often limited and flawed. However an unfavourable period should not be used as an excuse for failure. The main reason for failure is not directly connected to the tempo of the class struggle and is instead the result of our own actions as Marxists. We have to assume responsibility for our actions and try to intensify efforts to create a united socialist organisation. The point is we need a united Marxist or workers party in order to relate to the possible struggles that will be generated by the effects of the austerity measures and the present crisis of capitalism.

Slaughter assumes that the importance of the decline and crisis of capitalism will result in reactionary New Labour government will be forced to undermine the gains and material conditions of the working class and will utilise the anti-trade union laws for this purpose. Hence the aim of the trade unions should be to smash these laws in order to liberate the unions from control by the state and to develop working class political independence from capital. This perspective was reasonable for the period it was written. But it was falsified because the period of New Labour government did not result in the possible struggles of the trade unions, with a few exceptions. The alliance between New Labour and the trade union bureaucracy was maintained and the result was few strikes, and the process of the decline of capitalism was modified by a period of upswing. These developments indicate that eve when a perspective can be said to be a reasonable accurate assessment of social reality it can still be falsified by exceptional and unexpected aspects such as periods of boom and prosperity within an overall situation of decline. Slaughter utilises the view that capitalism has entered into decline in the 1970’s as the basis of his perspective. But this approach can result in dogma if he cannot envisage that the very reasons for decline such as the increasing domination of finance capital can also promote boom and prosperity. It was the provision of cheap credit by the organs of finance capital that undermined the prospect of mass struggles in the period of New Labour. His approach would have been more considered and careful if he had conceived of developments in terms of possibilities and not probabilities and had not conceived of the prospect of massive struggles as a virtual certainty. The utilisation of prediction within Marxism should be in order to outline tendencies and this would mean also taking consideration of the possible countertendencies. In this context it would have been more precise to argue that the installation of a reactionary New Labour government dedicated to the interests of capital means that the possibility for the intensification of the class struggle is present within the social situation. However New Labour is also committed to the introduction of policies that will attempt to both uphold the interest of capital and conciliate the forces of labour. The aim will be to avoid confrontation and strikes and to preserve the alliance between New Labour and the trade union bureaucracy. But if strikes do develop New Labour will act in a ruthless manner and attempt to defeat the strikes. The lesson will be that strikes do not benefit the working class. This is precisely what happened. When some strikes developed, as with the Fire-fighters, the government was prepared to act in order to repress the strike. They were successful and few strikes occurred during their period of office.

In other words, the government used measures of both carrot and stick in order to obtain the acceptance of the Labour movement for the policy of acceptance of the interests of capital and the subordination of labour. This meant some concessions were granted the Labour movement and New Labour acted in order to avoid the possibility of strikes. It did not thrive on confrontation in the manner of Thatcherism. At the level of ideology the period of reformism was over, but New Labour did utilise some reforms in order to obtain the subservience of the trade unions to capital. The trade union bureaucracy also acted in order to isolate militant strikes. Hence the period never repeated the winter of discontent of 1979, and so the perspective of Slaughter was falsified. This situation indicated that he should not have been so adamant in his predictions and allowed for the possibility of different developments. The reason he did not do so was in order to provide the most favourable arguments for the creation of a new party in the period of New Labour government. Ironically when mass struggle did develop, the anti-war protests, the situation was still not favourable for the creation of a new socialist party. This was because Marxism was in organisational crisis because of the organisational debacle related to the demise of the Socialist Alliance and the generation in struggle considered Marxism to be irrelevant. This indicated that struggle in and of itself does not necessarily favour the creation of a new socialist party and that the role of Marxism is crucial if the prospect of the formation of a socialist party is to be advanced.

Slaughter also argues that the unprincipled character of Stalinism and Social Democracy has been linked to its nationalist orientation and rejection of principled internationalism. He outlines how the working class is international and develops production on the basis of the importance of the world economy. This means the only principled strategy is international and must be against any adaptation to the interests of the national state and the domination of capital. This point is principled and should be upheld. The problem is that he assumes that because Stalinism can no longer function as a mechanism for the equilibrium of capitalism the prospect of international revolution is greater. This standpoint does not understand the cold war which meant the USA and the USSR were in a situation of rivalry and conflict. The USSR attempted to expand its sphere of influence despite the opposition of the USA, and the result was tensions between two rival social systems. Hence Stalinism was always an unreliable instrument of the requirements of capitalism and was not always subordinated to the imperatives of world capitalism. Consequently it is dogmatic and over-generalised to conceive of Stalinism as the counterrevolutionary instrument of capitalism. It could have this role but it could also act in an anti-capitalist manner if this conformed to the aim of the expansion of the Soviet bloc. However in an important sense Stalinism did act against the interests of world revolution because it was a factor in undermining the possible development of international class consciousness. Hence it would seem that the demise of Stalinism would advance the progress of world revolution. However what has to be recognised is that Social Democracy is still capable of acting in a counterrevolutionary manner and capitalist development itself promotes the prospect of political stability. Thus the onset of globalisation created the conditions for a new period of prosperity and the lessoning of class tensions. Furthermore the very demise of Stalinism had created an ideological mood of triumphalism that led to disorientation and the view that the era of socialism was over. The result was that the end of Stalinism seemed to be the end of socialism even if that could not be the actual historical truth. Stalinism was anti-working class but this is not how its character was universally perceived. Instead the very relation of the working class to socialism became questioned.

Slaughter argues that the struggle of Bosnia against Serbian expansionism indicates the prospects for internationalism in the post-Stalin era. But he is actually establishing himself that the very demise of the USSR and the crisis of Stalinism has actually intensified national chauvinism and led to the resurgence of national struggles in the former USSR and Eastern Europe. Thus it would be a dogmatic claim to contend that the demise of the USSR is creating the conditions for the promotion of internationalist class consciousness. Instead it would be more accurate to claim that the development of globalisation creates the objective conditions for international solidarity because of the inter-dependent character of production and trade. But the legacy of the importance of national based struggles and the role of trade union consciousness means that the importance of internationalism is not mechanically and automatically generated by these material conditions of production. Instead it was necessary for Marxism to develop ideological struggle in order to sustain the standpoint of internationalism against all those reactionary forces – from New Labour to Conservatism – that still sustained and nourished nationalism. Hence it would be an over-simplification to suggest that because of the demise of Stalinism the prospects of internationalism had been automatically advanced. Instead it could be argued that the present crisis of capitalism has created the most favourable conditions for the promotion of international class consciousness. It is possible for Marxists to argue for the promotion of international unity of the working class against austerity measures, and to develop strategies that represent this standpoint. The struggle that is developing in Greece against austerity should be extended to the rest of the European Union, and this should also become a prelude to global working class action against austerity and crisis. This does not mean that Slaughter was wrong to suggest that the demise of Stalinism could advance internationalism because Stalinism was a national ideology that historically expressed the standpoint of socialism in one country. However the significance of globalisation and the specific importance of the crisis can advance internationalism more than the demise of Stalinism if the working class becomes conscious supporters of a revolutionary strategy. The actual effect of the demise of Stalinism was to promote the view of the omnipotence of capitalism rather than to advance internationalism.

Hence it was premature of Slaughter to suggest that the struggle in Bosnia and the Liverpool docks dispute was reconstructing the international workers movement. Instead it could be argued more convincingly that the situation was at that time still against the prospect of internationalism and the formation of an international socialist party. This meant it was dogmatic of him to suggest: “This stark contrast between the needs and spontaneous development of the class movement of the working class on the one hand and on the other the class role of the traditional parties, now revealed in all in the new situation, is the objective content of the great possibilities today for building a world party of socialist revolution, with sections in every country.”(9) It could be argued that this comment is true to the extent that the various struggles that have developed in this period are expressing aspects of internationalism because of their conflict with the traditional organisations of the working class. But this comment is also premature because the outbreak of struggles in this period are few and have not reached the potential of being able to challenge capitalism and establish an alternative leadership for the working class. Also the Fourth International, in its many manifestations, is still very small and isolated. The development of the mass movement has not led to the generation of the size of the forces of the Fourth International. Indeed it could be argued that this period was still not favourable to the development of mass struggle. However for reasons of party ideology Slaughter has to over-estimate the importance of existing struggles and to suggest that the crisis of revolutionary leadership is close to resolution. This suggestion is a travesty of actual events, but his exaggerated view means that he ignores the actual stabilisation of capitalism in this period. What is necessary is to develop a programme that recognises the stability of capitalism in the 1990’s and so does not overestimate the prospects for revolutionary upheaval. However, he is not along in his delusions. The SWP considered the Tory governments pit closure programme in the early 1990’s as the start of a new offensive period in the class struggle and the Socialist Party also shared these illusions. It would seem that the more the various Marxist organisations were isolated the more prone were they to proclaim the possibility of success and progress.

Slaughter based his optimistic predictions at the time when his organisation was probably only 50 strong. It was the requirements of party ideology that led him to crass optimistic conclusions. However the main problem was that this optimism was based on a false interpretation of reality, what was a period of economic and political stability was considered to be an expression of crisis and conflict. The result could only be eventual impatience and demoralisation because at some point the confidence represented by the various predictions of the intensification of the class struggle would be shown to be false. At some point the significance of reality would indicate that the perspectives based on excessive optimism were an illusion and the result would be crisis within the organisation. This is what happened with Workers Press and the result was a combination of splits and liquidation. The grandiose claims were shown to be falsified by events, but the irony is that the development of a potential favourable situation is being created in the present for the growth of a Marxist organisation but Workers Press is no more because of subjective impatience. It proclaimed an end to its isolation when the possibilities for continuation of isolation were likely because of the unfavourable economic and political situation. In a certain sense Slaughter had outlined an immaculate argument as to why the period of isolation would be ended and revolutionary Marxism would no longer be marginalised. But the kernel of his argument was actually based on formal assumptions and predictions that were not realised. However his standpoint was not revised. Instead his argument become more dogmatic and ultimately it led to the view that the party political organisation itself undermined the development of working class consciousness and activity. The result was to dissolve the organisation and to effectively proclaim the irrelevance of Workers Press. However the irony of this situation was that the political situation was not improved. Instead all that had happened was that the crisis of Marxism intensified because of the demise of one more political group. This was the outcome of subjectivism and false optimism.

What should an organisation have done in the 1990’s? It should have primarily tried to elaborate the objective truth of the situation and recognised that the situation was actually unfavourable to the development of class struggle. This meant the prediction that struggles would generate the formation of a Marxist party was very problematical. Instead the efforts of the various Marxist groups should have been upon unity in order to promote the development of a single socialist organisation. This task was partially resolved with the formation of the Socialist Alliance, but progress was undermined by the splitting tactics of some of its component parts. Part of the problem was that some of the various organisations believed that the reactionary character of New Labour would promote class struggle and the prospect of the growth of the various Marxist organisations. The necessity of unity seemed superfluous in this situation. But the reality was that unity was crucial because of the very unfavourable conditions for the class struggle. It was necessary to prepare for the future development of class conflict by the creation of a united socialist organisation. However this task was underestimated because of the belief in the prediction that the limitations of capitalism would generate massive class confrontations and so resolve the party question. With these illusions Marxists abdicated their responsibilities and did not take the responsibility seriously to create a united socialist organisation. They instead had the belief that the spontaneous logic of the class struggle would resolve political and organisational tasks. This standpoint was articulated most emphatically by Slaughter, who considered the very creation of a socialist organisation by Marxists to be elitist and propagandist. He was suggesting that the very actions of the working class would somehow create the adequate political instrument for the furtherance of the aims of socialism, and so ignoring the importance of the role of Marxists to advocate and act to promote the creation of the revolutionary party.

The superficial optimism of his standpoint was based on the view that the demise of Stalinism meant that its post-war role in sustaining the equilibrium of world capitalism was over. Hence the situation was characterised by a potential new revolutionary era because Stalinism could no longer constrain the activity of the working class in the developed capitalist countries and the oppressed nations. This meant the contradictions of capitalism could no longer be displaced because of the removal of an important factor of political stability, and instead the crisis would intensify and the prospect of polarisation between the classes was on the agenda. The Soviet bureaucracy had accepted the domination of the USA, which was the basis of the stability of post-war capitalism. But what was an important flaw in the reasoning of Slaughter was that the working out of the implications of the demise of Stalinism was not immediate. Instead what was apparent in the short-term was the victory and strengthening of capitalism in Easter Europe and the former USSR. This situation promoted the conditions for the boom of global capitalism. It seemed that the situation was characterised by the consolidation of the position of capital and the end of the socialist project. In other words the removal of the role of Stalinism had not generated class struggle and instead only contributed to the disorientation of the international working class. The effective end of the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism in upholding world capitalism did not immediately contribute to the creation of a situation of instability because of the material possibility of boom and the apparent strengthening of capital in its relation with labour. The revolutionary possibilities created by the demise of Stalinism could not be immediate for these reasons, and instead the working class was put on the defensive. It is also necessary to recognise that many people believed that Gorbachev was trying to promote the socialist project and so the failure of his policies was considered to be a defeat for socialism.

Only some of the small forces of Trotskyism truly understood the significance of the demise of Stalinism. In contrast Slaughter believed that the working class would immediately act to confirm this theory. He argues: “The working class now fights back without the burden of Stalinism.”(10) But for the reasons given the immediate reaction within the working class was one of disorientation and it acted defensively. In ideological and political terms the end of Stalinism did not promote the prospect of the intensification of the class struggle. Instead the continuation of the offensive of capital in the conditions of the demise of Stalinism actually meant the working class was on the defensive. It would require the development of other factors before the demise of Stalinism would be perceived to be of benefit by the international working class. In other words there was a difference between what principled Marxism believed the situation should be if Stalinism was no longer a factor and the actual reality based on the perceptions and ideological beliefs of the majority of people. The majority of people considered that Stalinism was an expression of some type of relation to Socialism and so considered that the demise of Stalinism was a setback for socialism. This ideological belief may have been false but it became true in the sense that people believed it and acted accordingly. Thus the result was that people did not recognise that the possibilities for progress in the class struggle were actually advanced by the downfall of Stalinism, and this belief was reinforced by the fact that the advance of globalisation resulted in boom and the prospect for material enhancement. Consequently the relation between the demise of Stalinism and the intensification of the class struggle could only unravel in more complex terms and was not an immediate prospect.

This point requires further elaboration. The standpoint of Marxism is that the role of Stalinism is an important cause of the equilibrium of post-war capitalism. Hence the removal of the importance of Stalinism represents the disruption of this equilibrium and the prospect for the intensification of class conflict and progress in the process of social transformation. But the cause did not have the appropriate effect because of the role of ideological and its relation to the influence that illusions have on social practice. The popular uprisings against Stalinism led generally to the restoration of capitalism, and so it seemed that the end of Stalinism represented an advance of the forces of capitalism and the consolidation of the instruments of counterrevolution. This meant the actual demise of a force for reaction and the stability of capitalism was not recognised, and instead it seemed that the influence of capitalism had advanced in relation to what was perceived as a setback for socialism. Most people associated Stalinism with socialism, and only the small forces of Marxism understood its actual causal nature as an expression of counterrevolution and support for the overall stability of world capitalism. Hence because of the influence of the ideological view of Stalinism, its demise was not perceived as the undermining of the stability of capitalism and instead it actually seemed that capitalism had been consolidated in terms of its economic expansion and the development of globalisation. Indeed it could be argued that this ideological view had some relation to actual developments in reality in that capitalism did benefit from the downfall of Stalinism. The overall situation was complex and did not mean that working people would be motivated to struggle against capitalism because of the demise of Stalinism. Instead the influence of ideology and the importance of the actual results of the downfall of Stalinism meant that the very notion of class struggle and the aspiration of socialism became discredited. The political situation was conducive to the view that the historical role of the working class was over and capitalism had gained an important victory with the demise of Stalinism. This ideological situation was reinforced by the fact that the defenders of capitalism understood what had been gained by the end of Stalinism was the prospect that capitalism no longer required the ambiguous counterrevolutionary support of Stalinism. The system would be able to defend itself from the prospect of revolution in the manner it preferred and with the instruments that it found suitable. The supporters of capitalism never wanted the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism and considered it was hindering the realisation of their project which was the total domination of the world in accordance with the imperatives of capital accumulation. The acceptance of the role of Stalinism was always a concession that the defenders of capitalism did not want to make. This is why they were not dismayed by the end of Stalinism and considered the result was a victory and the expression of progress towards the creation of a global capitalist economy.

Hence the mixture of ideology and objective truth expressed the bourgeois view that the demise of Stalinism was in the interests of the capitalist system. In contrast Slaughter expresses a one-sided view that the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism is indispensable to the continuation of capitalism. He cannot understand why the defenders of capitalism would never reconcile themselves to the expansionist power of Stalinism, and so would welcome the downfall of Stalinism. However the view that the counterrevolutionary influence of Stalinism over the working class has effectively ended and so will result in an impetus to the class struggle seems to be a valid perspective in the long run. But for reasons outlined this view cannot immediately enter the consciousness of the working class because of the equation of socialism with Stalinism. In a confused manner the international working class may even have a sense of a defeat of their class aspirations, but the major reason why class struggle has not been generated with the downfall of Stalinism is the fact that the realisation of globalisation has advanced the prospects for boom and so increased the chances of class compromise. In ideological and economic terms the apparent necessity of militant class struggle has been discredited. But it can certainly be argued that without the important influence of Stalinism the prospects for the advance of Trotskyism have been enhanced in the long term. However for this perspective to be realised would also require the worsening of the situation of capitalism and the related promotion of the arguments for socialism. But it is also necessary to recognise that the period of the demise of Stalinism is occurring when the forces of principled Marxism have never been more isolated from the working class and the ideological influence of the arguments for capitalism are hegemonic. Hence it would be superficial and complacent to suggest that the demise of Stalinism will automatically result in the rise of Trotskyism and the influence of revolutionary Marxism. Instead principled Marxism has to resolve its own crisis and it has to develop a strategy that can relate to the actual development of the intensification of the class struggle. But in the 1990’s Marxism was not able to meet these challenges and instead was prone to increasing splits and this situation was connected to the pressures of a period of reaction rather than opportunities posed by the intensification of the class struggle.

Slaughter could reply and suggest that the situation that resulted in the general stability of post-war capitalism has been ended with the downfall of Stalinism: “On this basis US imperialism led the free world in accepting the Soviet bureaucracy’s political, economic and military adjustment to world capitalism. It was this new totality for imperialism, emerging after World War 2 and temporarily displacing its structural contradictions that constituted the ‘world order’ which, already under great strain, definitively broke up when the Stalinist bureaucracy collapsed in 1989-90.”(10) The apparent result is a new world disorder and the intensification of class contradictions because the ruling class has no other option than to develop an offensive against the gains of the working class. In this situation the working class no longer is limited by the constraining role of Stalinism. But the situation is not necessarily and immediately characterised by crisis because the ruling class does have options such as globalisation. This is dismissed as an ideological myth by Slaughter, but globalisation is the very result of the demise of Stalinism. It represents nothing more than the development of a global world economy because Stalinism is no longer in existence as an antagonistic social system that undermined the possibility for the realisation of a truly global economy. The importance of globalisation is that it has promoted world trade, investment and financial transactions and the result has been the development of a period of material prosperity. This has meant the very offensive of capital against labour could be modified and effectively replaced by the realisation of limited reforms. The result has been that the class polarisation of the 1980’s could be replaced by an ideological mood of class compromise and this was expressed by an actual decrease in class conflict. In contrast, Slaughter cannot recognise the reality of this situation because he can only equate the end of Stalinism with the onset of deepening crisis and revolutionary possibilities. He has overestimated the importance of Stalinism for the continuation of capitalism and so cannot recognise the development of a new era that may also offset the deepening of the contradictions of capitalism for a limited period. This is the era of globalisation which he tries to ignore.

He suggests that capitalism has no more options and instead can only uphold its domination by means of an offensive against the working class. Consequently this situation is expressed by the reactionary logic of Social Democracy and the fact that it has a programme completely adapted to the requirements of capital. Capital can only thrive by undermining the social position of the working class. It could be argued that this situation has recently been realised by the crisis beginning in 2008 and the imposition of austerity measures at the expense of the working class. But to argue that this situation was characteristic of the 1990’s was premature and ignored the capacity of capitalism to continue to develop the productive forces and increase profitability because of the absorption of the former Stalinist bloc into the world economy. It could be insisted that capitalism had no inherent capacity to develop and that its major period of expansion was over, but these exceptional circumstances meant that a new era of development became possible despite an overall situation of decline. The 1980’s had shown that capitalism could only continue at the expense of the working class and that slump and stagflation had become its common characteristics. There was a massive decline in manufacturing and in this period globalisation meant the domination of financial services at the expense of industry. Hence the period was expressed by some tense class conflicts and the attempt to decrease the influence of the trade unions. It was the defeat of the miner’s strike that enabled British capitalism to continue rather than any inherent dynamism of the system. Thus what Slaughter was arguing could actually apply to the period before the demise of Stalinism. But, paradoxically the very downfall of Stalinism generated the prospect of a mini-boom and created the conditions for the renewed profitability of the system. This meant it was possible to lessen the effects of the offensive of capital against labour, and the result was that the type of politics represented by Thatcher and Reagan could even be portrayed as anachronistic. However the ideology of the subordination of labour to the interests of capital was retained by New Labour and the overall policy was to reject the traditional project of Social Democracy. This is why the continuation of privatisation was continued alongside the implementation of some reforms in order to try and realise the aspirations of working people. In a sense the period of intense class struggle was lessened because there was sense that the capital had won the class war and that the domination of capital had become stabilised. It was believed that the working class had accepted the aims of capital and that the era of trade union militancy was over. In contrast, Slaughter was proclaiming a new era of class struggle because the constraining role of Stalinism was over. This was a dogmatic and premature perspective for the reasons given.

However Slaughter not only considers that Stalinism was support for capitalism in opposing any prospect of world revolution, he also suggests that it expressed the ability of capitalism to repress its structural contradictions and the tendency for decline and crisis: “For this period of some 70 years capitalism could postpone what we now expect and prepare for: the unfolding of its historic, structural contradictions in a continuous series of revolutionary situations. With the collapse of Stalinism and the manifestation of the accumulated basic structural contradictions of the whole system this unfolding can be postponed no longer. In the struggles that lie ahead, the working class will reconstruct itself and develop adequate Marxist leadership.”(12) However, it is one thing to argue that Stalinism has had a counterrevolutionary role that has undermined the development of world revolution, but it is another thing entirely to suggest that it can also be responsible for the suppression of the unravelling of the contradictions of capitalism and the potential for social change. Indeed this would be a caricature of the actual situation.

Slaughter is aware himself that the inter-war period of 1918-39 led to numerous revolutionary situations because of economic crisis and political instability. It is true that Stalinism often had a reactionary role that led to the failure to realise the potential of these situations but it could not actually repress the realisation of the economic and political logic of capitalism in the form of crisis and the polarisation of the class struggle. Furthermore the major aspect of the economic and political stability of the post-war period was the hegemony of USA imperialism which utilised its hegemony in order to repress the tendency towards inter-imperialist conflicts and to promote the conditions of economic boom. The USA was the national personification for the tendency of a new period of the development of the productive forces on the basis of capitalist relations of production. Hence the policies of the USA represented the logic of capitalism in this period and it was this role that corresponded to the ability to repress the overall tendency for decline and crisis because of the imperialist limitations of the system. This period was one of general political stability. However it was the decline of the USA caused by the end of the Bretton Woods system in 1971 that expressed the influence of the contradictions of capitalism. Hence the ultimate result was the intensification of the class struggle and the offensive of capital in the 1980’s. The importance of the USSR was secondary in that it was not part of the capitalist world economy and its major significance was to undermine the development of revolutionary struggles. The very non-capitalist character of the USSR meant it could not be the major instrument for the stabilisation of world capitalism. This role was carried out by the USA. This is why the crisis of the USA has been manifested in the increasing contradictory character of capitalism and the reliance on an offensive of capital in order to uphold the profitability of the system. Furthermore, the demise of the USSR and the Soviet bloc has actually offset the continuing deepening of the contradictions of capitalism and so enabled a postponement of the increasing polarisation of the class struggle until the present. Thus the view that the USSR was the major instrument for the stability of capitalism and the repression of the contradictions of capitalism is basically false. It is based on the view that aspects of non-capitalism are required to uphold a declining capitalism. This standpoint is an idealist denial of the importance of the USA and the unravelling of the tendencies of decline of capitalism like the falling rate of profit. The role of the USSR has been essentially political and ideological in that it has opposed international struggles for socialism and been reluctant to support revolution. Thus the support of the USSR for the national bourgeoisie in the Third World has meant the prospect of socialist revolution has been restricted. But this reactionary role cannot be compared with the global and hegemonic importance of the USA. It has been the situation of the USA that has been of crucial importance for world capitalism.

It is also that the importance of globalisation has proved to be a complicating factor in relation to the unravelling of the contradictions of capitalism. On the one hand it has proved to be an ideological myth that globalisation can represent a new era of the development of capitalism without crisis. On the other hand globalisation has meant the prospect of renewed economic development because of the growth of international trade and the possibility for increased financial transactions. The result has been a mini boom that has meant Slaughter’s predictions about the crisis of capitalism have proved to be premature. Manifestation of crisis was postponed for 15 years in a situation in which the benefits of globalisation were apparent. But the dogmatic aspects of Slaughter’s analysis meant that he ignored the significance of globalisation and instead his exclusive emphasis was on the importance of the demise of Stalinism. What Marxism should have been trying to explain was the importance of globalisation in this period instead of dismissing its importance. It could also be argued that Stalinism was not the only thing that had contributed to the stability of capitalism. What was primary in this context was the role of ideology. The very legacy of the struggles in the 1980’s was to suggest that capitalism could not be defeated and that the era of trade union struggle was over. Hence to suggest that a new era of struggles would rapidly occur because of the demise of Stalinism was simplistic. This perspective was not improved by making the dubious claim that Stalinism was the major aspect repressing the unfolding of the contradictions of capitalism. There is not a direct link between the tempo of the contradictions of capitalism and the development of class struggle. Instead a favourable situation has to develop, and the prospect of victory or defeat will influence whether struggles are likely to occur. If we suggest that the development of contradictions is the ultimate cause of struggles, the actual effects can be diverse. Furthermore, the demise of Stalinism has in the short-term apparently strengthened capitalism rather than weakened it. The end of Stalinism is a factor in the development of globalisation. Slaughter can only ignore the actual effects of the demise of Stalinism in order to make his claims that the result is to contribute to the definite progress of the world revolution. The situation is far more complex than the simplicity of these claims.

An important methodological problem with his approach is that he conceives of predictions as having definite ontological status that they will become true in reality. He is insistent that the end of Stalinism can only be beneficial to the class struggle. But the actual result of this development is far more complex, and strong reasons can be provided that suggests the inability of the working class to overcome Stalinism in a revolutionary manner has resulted in defeats, such as the restoration of capitalism within the Soviet bloc. This development has also led to disorientation within the working class, and so working people are not yet ready to embark on struggles against the offensive of capital. It would have been more cautious and less dogmatic for Slaughter to claim that the ultimate result of the downfall of Stalinism will be profound, but that it is still premature to evaluate its influence on working class consciousness. But what Trotskyism should be arguing is that the end of an important instrument for counterrevolution can be of benefit to the working class, and the situation can be advantageous to class struggle. However in order for this prospect to be realised the working class has to reject its ideological view that equates Stalinism with socialism. Only a process of transformation of the popular views about Stalinism will enable its reactionary aspects to be sufficiently recognised, and the result would then be beneficial to the class struggle. Instead of this ideological transformation, Slaughter is relying on the impulse of economic catastrophe for convincing people that the approach of peaceful co-existence should be replaced by the perspective of revolutionary class struggle. This economic reductionism results in a superficial optimism that underestimates the importance of the ideological aspects of the development of class consciousness.

The strategic conclusion that Slaughter develops from his analysis is that the period is maturing for the possibility of a socialist offensive. This situation is related to the inability of capitalism to make any more concessions to the working class and the fact that Social Democracy has become the reactionary personification of the interests of capital and so will be at the forefront of the process of attacks on the working class. This means it is necessary that the Unions should not be content with being the expression of the sectional interests of the working class and instead should become the organs of struggle against the capitalist state and the generation of the overthrow of the system. The role of Marxists is to act within the various struggles in order that the socialist perspective should be advanced. The approach of intervention from the outside is elitists and inadequate. This argument outlines in reasonable terms the necessity of a socialist offensive. The period when capitalism was able to generate reforms that undermined the approach of revolution is coming to an end. This means the working class should unite around objectives that are based on the transformation of capitalism into a system that is democratic and based on the interests of working people.

However for reasons given the immediate call for a socialist offensive is premature. The onset of globalisation does indicate that capitalism can still generate the material basis for the introduction of reforms, and this meant the politics of class compromise could be realised in the reactionary form of the government of New Labour which was committed to the neo-liberal agenda. In other words it was possible to reconcile the commitment to capital with the introduction of limited reforms that would represent concessions to the labour movement. In this context the arguments in favour of a socialist offensive would be undermined because of the apparent social advances being made under New Labour. This did not meant that the arguments for a socialist offensive should not be made, but that this perspective would have to be modified in relation to the significance of globalisation and the problem of the consolidation of the approach of class compromise. The problem with Slaughter’s approach is that because of his economic reductionism and emphatic view that developing economic crisis would mean a general offensive by capital against labour, he was certain that labour could only protect its interests by means of united struggle against the aims of capital. Hence he was conceiving of an imminent situation of class polarisation and the imperative of a socialist offensive if defeats were to be avoided. What he could not envisage because of the limitations of his analysis was that the New Labour government would attempt to undermine the social position of the working class by the introduction of limited concessions that still ensured that the balance of power between capital and labour was in the interests of capital. Hence it was necessary to try and argue for a socialist offensive in a manner that could relate to this complex situation. This would also mean challenging the effective alliance of the trade union bureaucracy with the New Labour government. The trade unions would have to b democratised if they were to become instruments of struggle against New Labour and capital. In contrast Slaughter assumes that the trade unions will become instruments of struggle because of the reality of the offensive of capital. But the point is that these types of assumptions have to be modified and revised because the attack of capital is being carried out in a very complex manner and is based on the attempt to avoid confrontation with Labour. For example the Private Finance Initiative in the NHS is being promoted alongside the provision of extra resources for the NHS. This is why protests against PFI are muted and limited. The point is that the strategy of labour and the socialist offensive has to be made more complex if it is to become relevant and important.

In other words the offensive of capital against labour is not taking the form of an all out confrontation of the forces of capital against labour. Instead the process is gradual and involves concessions being made to labour. The result is that the trade unions were not mobilised against the New Labour government, and instead there was an effective alliance of the New Labour government and the trade unions. The offensive of capital against labour is taking place in forms that were not anticipated by Slaughter. This does not means that the increasing subordination of labour to capital is not occurring under New Labour but that it is actually taking forms that are not unpalatable to labour. This is why it is difficult to mobilise labour in an offensive against capital. Instead it seems that negotiation and moderation are more important tactics when it comes to trying to express the interests of labour in its relations with capital. It seems that the actual gains of labour could be undermined by the ambition and generalised character of a socialist offensive. However in the long-term the arguments of Slaughter are credible. The significance of globalisation has proved to be limited and has not offset the general decline of capitalism. This has meant the necessity of an offensive of capital against labour in order to try and restore the condition of high profits and an impetus to economic growth. In this situation the forces of labour can only uphold their social position by resorting to a socialist offensive. Aspects of this type of struggle are already evident in Greece where limited general strikes have taken place against the austerity measures of the government. Capital no longer has the resources to try and support measures of class compromise and is instead resorting to class war in order to uphold its domination over labour. If serious defeat is to be avoided labour will have to develop measures that mount to a socialist offensive. Hence the major problem with the approach of Slaughter is that it is premature and not unprincipled or irrelevant.

Slaughter argues that the programme required for the struggles of the working class should correspond to the changing needs of the working class at every phase of capitalist development and should outline a strategy that should advance the capacity to realise the class aims of the working class and humanity in general. This would imply that the different periods of the transformation of capitalism in economic and political terms requires the elaboration of new programmes. If this is what is being suggested the DSA would agree. We would argue that the period of the intensification of inter-imperialist contradictions would require the development of a programme that was based on the importance of the relation between international class struggle to the development of war and the prospect of revolution. This type of programme was connected to the Transitional Programme of Trotsky and the question of strategy was connected to the importance of economic crisis, the prospect of war and the role of the Communist International.. However the onset of the cold war meant that the challenges for the development of the class struggle became different and more difficult. The international working class was divided by the cold war and this period was one of boom and the decrease in the process of revolutionary upheaval. The programme of Marxism would have to elaborate why Marxism is still important despite the apparent stability created by the domination of the USA, and to argue that the boom did not overcome the limitations of capitalism because of alienation and the continued subordination of labour within the relations of production. This programme would indicate that the French revolution of 1968 was of historical importance and was an expression of the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism. This programme would also connect strategy to the growing militancy and struggles of the working class.

The 1980’s led to the offensive of capital against labour in order to undermine historic social gains and so the defensive task of the attempt to consolidate reforms was connected to the necessity of a socialist offensive. It was the very isolation of the struggles of the working class that enabled capital to gain victories in the class struggle and to shift the balance of economic and social power in its favour. Only if the trade unions and working class organisations transformed their approach and activity would it be possible to defeat the offensive of capital. The onset of globalisation following the defeat of Stalinism enabled the ruling class to generate the resources for a brief period of class compromise. This period coincided with the era of New Labour government and promoted the illusion that reformism was still possible. In actuality New Labour still carried out its reactionary project of the complete adaptation of Social Democracy to the imperatives of capital. This tenuous period of class compromise was coming to an end in the period 2007-2008. New Labour was historically exhausted and could only carry out the imperatives of capital by making massive public expenditure cuts. The credit crunch situation indicated that the brief period of reforms was over. The interests of the working class could only be upheld by the development of a socialist offensive. Instead the New Labour government was replaced by a Tory government that was determined to resume the offensive of capital against labour. The situation of class polarisation was being created, but the inertia of the unions was undermining the prospect of a socialist offensive. This prospect was also undermined by the situation of the decline of the Marxist organisations.

Slaughter insists that we can be confident that the trade unions will rise to the occasion and act not only to defend the gains of the working class but also become the instrument of the process of social transformation. This view is based on the strategic understanding that the trade unions are the major organs of the working class and can represent its interests against the reactionary role of Social Democracy. It is also based on the understanding that because Social Democracy may be the instruments of the offensive of capital against labour the result will be a historic split between the trade unions and the New Labour government. However this prediction was never realised. This is not because it did not have some basis in reality because of the necessity of the continuation of the offensive of capital in a period of economic decline. But what Slaughter did not anticipate was that the globalisation meant that class contradictions could be modified and displaced for a limited period of time. The result was the realisation of a new era of class compromise and the offensive of capital took a more gradual form that was acceptable to the trade union bureaucracy and many of the members of the unions. In this context it would require the role of Marxism to point out what was happening and the development of support for the revolutionary view that the period of class compromise would be brief and superficial. Marxism should also have argued that the trade unions should have split with New Labour at the time of the war of intervention against Iraq because the interests of imperialism were not compatible with those of labour. However this possibility was undermined by the fact that Marxists also neglected this task and concentrated on developing the popular basis of the mass ant war movement. Thus the trade unions still remained the major social bulwark of support for New Labour in this period.

Consequently Slaughter’s view that the trade unions would naturally become more radical and militant in a period of the offensive of capital was shown to have been one-sided and optimistic. He effectively ignored the legacy of the period of defeats of labour and the related discrediting of militant activity, and he did not anticipate the possibility for class compromise during the New Labour era. Furthermore, he also underestimated the importance of the democratic transformation of the unions and the necessity for a new militant leadership if the process of an offensive against capital is to be generated. But primarily he denied the importance of the role of Marxism in striving for the transformation of the Unions. He believed that this transformation would be a spontaneous process, but what was actually required was the intervention of Marxists in order to promote the credible arguments as to why the trade unions should split with New Labour and embark on a process of socialist offensive.

But Slaughter is right to suggest the following: “But above all the programme must be one not for but of the working class; the expression of the class movement of a working class which is making its own changes in society, overcoming the divisions within itself, advancing to its own emancipation.”(13) He is suggesting that to understand the contradictions of capitalism and the international nature of the process of transformation is to understand the struggles of the working class. Hence the contradictions of capitalism do not represent an external imperative that is imposed onto the class struggle and which are dominant when trying to explain the development of the activity and consciousness of the working class. Instead what is a crucial contradiction of capitalism is the fact that the working class does not accept the imperatives of capitalism passively and uncritically and instead struggles to uphold its own social interests and those of humanity. The result is that the working class is never reconciled to capitalism and is instead the major social basis of discontent within society and is capable of resolving the contradictions of capitalism in a manner that promotes the revolutionary transformation of society and the advance of communism. In this manner we can contend that the relation of structure and agency within capitalism is interactive and dynamic. The various structures that reproduce and uphold the capital relation also generates the activity and dynamism that can contribute to the prospect of the creation of a historical alternative. Hence the role of labour in upholding the domination of capital can also facilitate the alternative of communism. What is important in this regard is the role of struggle. This represents the rejection of the role of labour as being nothing more than the instrument of valorisation and capital accumulation and instead it represents the possibility of an alternative to the continuation of the domination of capital. Thus the role of Marxists is to articulate the possibilities of struggle and how it suggests the resolution of the contradictions of capitalism in a manner that does not promote the interests of capital.

Indeed it can be argued that labour itself expresses the central contradiction of capitalism. Labour is the aspect of the social relations of capitalism that cannot be reconciled with capital. The problem of the alienated character of labour within the social relations of capitalism can only be resolved by the rejection of this alienation by ending the subordination of labour within the existing relations of production. However the problem with Slaughter’s approach is that he considers the contradictory character of labour as being sufficient for labour to resolve this contradiction without the effective intervention of Marxism. However historical experience has shown the difficulty of this task without the role of Marxism. The point is that the intervention of Marxism is necessary to the extent that this advances the capacity and ability of labour to resolve the contradictions of capitalism in a progressive and revolutionary manner. The role of Marxism should not be to advance its domination over the working class and instead should be to generate a creative synthesis of Marxism and labour that develops the very attributes of labour to influence and transform the social relations. For example, Marxism has an important educational and propaganda role in arguing for workers control of production as an important mechanism of the transformation of the social relations. But Slaughter would seem to suggest that even this role for Marxism is elitist and unwanted, but he does not outline in strategic terms how the spontaneous struggle of the working class can bring about the realisation of communism. Instead he assumes that the dynamic logic of the conflict between capital and labour will realise the success of the revolutionary transformation of society.

This criticism does not mean that the role of spontaneous struggle is unimportant. However the issue actually concerns the relation between the importance of spontaneity and Marxist theory and organisation. The importance of Marxism is that it can facilitate the ability of the working class to carry out struggle that is increasing conscious and ambitious in its scope and aims. This does not mean that Marxism imposes itself on the struggle but rather that its development of strategy and perspectives can provide the generation of the understanding of the consciousness and objectives within the very struggles of the working class. In this sense the intervention of Marxism is not artificial and elitist and is instead in accordance with the logic of class struggle. In contrast, Slaughter is ambiguous about the relation of Marxism to the class struggle, he can consider Marxism to be an artificial interference that is unwanted, and he can also conceive that it has a role in the elaboration of programme and perspectives. This lack of clarity can be confusing and it can be overcome if we understand that Marxism can interact with the class struggle in a constructive manner that is not elitist and is instead the theoretical expression of the possibilities of practical struggle. Without the influence of Marxism the various struggles are unlikely to realise their potential. Marxism indicates that the possibilities of the various struggles are expressed by the strategic aim of the overthrow of capitalism, and so the very importance of struggles does not make Marxism superfluous. Instead Marxism is an indispensable guide to action and the formulation of the strategy of the very struggles generated by capitalism. Without the influence of Marxism the various struggles are likely to be limited, restricted, sectional, and inclined to make unacceptable compromises. Hence the period of the offensive of the struggle against capitalism requires the highest possible level of influence of Marxism. The interaction of theory and practice expresses the prospect that the struggles can realise their potential in terms of the overthrow of capitalism.

In actuality Slaughter admits the necessity of a Marxist party if struggles are to go beyond the limits of the defensive and become part of an offensive struggle against capitalism: “The role of a party whose objective is socialism and the overthrow of the power of capital must be to show the way for the working class to build, in and through its initially defensive struggles, the understanding and confidence, the organisations and everything else that will be necessary to win the decisive struggles in front.”(14) This comment is an implicit acceptance that the beginning of the process of struggle will be limited to immediate objectives and so will be restricted in scope and character. Hence an essential task of Marxism will be to argue that this elemental form of struggle is not sufficient to realise the interests of the working class and that this beginning will have to be deepened and become part of a more ambitious project of the offensive of labour against capital. If support for the socialist offensive is to be promoted until the point it becomes popular and the basis of the action of the working class, the role of Marxism will be vital. The working class will not spontaneously recognise the importance and necessity of the socialist offensive as the answer to the offensive of capital. Only the growing influence of Marxism will ensure that the strategy of the socialist offensive becomes popular and a guide to action. However if the influence of Marxism remains marginal the effect of this will be the continued development of sectional struggles that lack the logic of becoming generalised. Furthermore in this situation the influence of the trade union bureaucracy will ensure that struggles remain limited and defensive. Hence in the last analysis, Slaughter accepts that Marxism is important for articulation of the idea of the socialist offensive. Marxism represents the theory of the socialist offensive, but only the working class can transform this theory into practice. This is what he is effectively arguing, but he sometimes obscures this understanding with formulations that seem to suggest Marxism is no longer important in terms of this relation of theory to practice.

For example, he also argues that the development of mass communist consciousness is the product of the working class changing itself through struggle: “This ‘alteration’ is not a matter of enlightenment, education, but rather of how the working class changes itself through the struggles, at first defensive, forced on it by capital.”(15) He argues that the working class will transform itself through struggle and become the representative of humanity and the potential for a new society. Slaughter also contends that this is why reforms are important in order to overcome the effects of degradation generated by capitalist relations of production. These points are valid. Marxists do not consider that their role is to preach to working people about the virtues of socialism because they understand that unless socialism becomes an expression of the interests of the mass movement it will not be realised. But this does not mean that we should reject the educational role of Marxism and socialist theory. We understand that in a period of defeats and demoralisation the influence of the ideas of socialism can be very marginal and people will often accept the domination of capital because their does not seem to be any alternative. Consequently even if struggles occur in this climate working people will not accept any possible relation between these struggles and the aim of socialism. Hence socialism seems to be something that is unobtainable and not relevant to the aspirations of the mass movement. In this context it is necessary for Marxism to develop propaganda and agitation that indicates the relation between socialism and the interests of the mass movement. It can argue why socialism can be the logical result of struggle and is the expression of the potential of class conflict. This was why Marxism was so important in the mid 1990’s. Since the 1980’s there had been an offensive of capital that had led to important defeats of the working class and the result was that the aim of socialism and even trade union militancy had become discredited. Hence the problem with Slaughter’s approach is that he assumes because of the continuation of the crisis of capitalism that working people are already receptive to the ideas of socialism. Therefore an important problem will be that Marxism will attempt to impose itself on the many struggles that will develop and which can quickly become revolutionary in character. This is a very one-sided view that is based on a completely false view of the balance of the class forces. The class forces are not favourable to struggle and the prospect of socialism, instead the level of struggles are very low and the idea of socialism has been discredited by successive defeats and world historical events. In this context the role of Marxism should be crucial.

Marxism is vitally important in order to revive the very conception of class struggle, the role of militancy and the strategic aim of socialism. It also has to provide arguments that oppose the view that the collective role of the working class is historically exhausted and so uphold the view that working people can still oppose the offensive of capital. This propaganda work has to be carried out before new struggles are likely to occur. Marxism has to provide the arguments as to why the class struggle is not over and why socialism is still historically feasible. In contrast, Slaughter is trying to imply that the working class is already in its present state developing the class consciousness required for the socialist offensive. What is actually an unfavourable balance of class forces is inverted by Slaughter and presented in an idealist manner as an expression of a situation that favours the victory of the working class over capitalism. This is why he preaches against the sins of Marxist elitism, but Marxism actually has a crucial role in this period, which it failed to realise, of trying to provide the theoretical arguments as to why the working class is not finished, and why the perspective of class struggle has not become antiquated. It is necessary to elaborate the arguments for revolution and communism in a period that is effectively reactionary and unfavourable for the realisation of socialism.

The approach of Slaughter is connected to the view that the necessity of a continued offensive of capital against labour in order to intensify the domination of capital must result in the development of struggles. The prospect of struggles developing is promoted by the demise of Stalinism. But the point is that the question of the development of struggle has a history. The previous period was generally characterised by the success of the offensive of capital against labour. This meant by the mid 1990’s the very conception of class struggle had become ideologically discredited. The influence of ideology was reflected in the low level of strikes and disputes and the overall acceptance that the domination of capital could not be challenged. Furthermore, the importance of globalisation provided additional reasons why it seemed that capitalism was dynamic and the very expression of what was meant by economic activity. In this context the fact that Stalinism was no longer able to constrain the development of the class struggle seemed to be secondary and almost irrelevant in a situation that seemed to benefit capitalism. In other words, the balance of class forces in economic, political and ideological terms seemed to favour the domination of capital. In this context, Slaughter is actually performing a disservice to the working class by trying to paint a gloomy picture in rosy colours. Instead of trying to outline objective truth, and establish the character of the situation, he prefers to outline an impression or mood of the imminent character of struggle. It could be argued in his defence that he is making the argument for the development of struggle based on reasonable assumptions. However his perspective is actually based on ignoring important aspects of social reality and is trying to impose a conception of what should be onto what is. Thus any attempt to present reality as accurately as possible is denounced as being a defence of accommodation to accomplished fact. But the unpleasant facts were that strikes were occurring at historical low levels and New Labour was about to be elected on a reactionary programme of complete subservience to capital.

Hence the actual unpleasant duty of Marxism in this period was to elaborate why struggles were not likely to develop in the near future and to attempt to sharpen the propaganda role of Marxism in terms of articulating the arguments in favour of the importance of class struggle and communism. In the attempt to establish what is real and credible it represents a complete illusion to try and suggest in any sense that revolution is imminent. Instead it is necessary to seriously outline why the ruling class has been successful in the class struggle in the recent period and so the prospects for revolution and communism are not maturing. This situation has been intensified by the fact that the demise of Stalinism was not brought about by the revolutionary actions of the working class. Instead there has been a restoration of capitalism which has only contributed to the renewed strength of global capitalism. It is also ludicrous for Slaughter, as a representative of a group of 50, to claim that they are about to become a mass party of world socialist revolution. The only outcome of this false and superficial optimism is impatience and then demoralisation. His false standpoint is a recipe for the promotion of crisis within Workers Press. Thus there is no theoretical alternative to the attempt to try and understand reality as accurately as possible. Only then can a reasonable strategy and perspectives be developed for the short term and long term. The alternative of subjectivism and the effective defence of idealism is to create the prospect of splits and this is what happened to the forces of Workers Press.

In other words instead of trying to connect the actual events and circumstances that explain why the existing situation is not favourable for the development of the class struggle, Slaughter makes the opposite conclusion. He maintains that because of the demise of Stalinism, and the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism caused by the decline of capitalism and the limitations of globalisation, the result will be class polarisation. The working class will be faced with the choice of struggle or capitulation to the imperatives of capital. He is confident that workers will decide to struggle and oppose capitalism. Hence the situation has become favourable to the development of the influence of Marxism in a situation that is creating the conditions for the promotion of class struggle. Unfortunately whilst this argument is based on what seems to be immaculate logic it is completely flawed because it is not based on the importance of empirical events. The significance of recent defeats will undermine the prospect of the imminent generation of struggles and the importance of the aspects that have contributed to the domination of capital over labour are ignored. Hence it seems as if he is describing a different situation in a new time and place. It is not that the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism is not occurring but this has a concrete content that is related to the legacy of recent developments and the temporary fact that globalisation has created the conditions for the modification of class conflicts in the form of material concessions to the working class. Furthermore the demise of Stalinism has not contributed to the end of the isolation of Trotskyism and instead has provided reasons to ideologically undermine the perspectives of Marxism. Hence the situation is not favourable for ending the isolation of Marxism. Instead Marxism has to be prepared to accept that the aims of capital might be uncontested by a working class that has been defeated in the recent period.

Slaughter argues that the offensive of capital is creating an immense discontent with the intensification of the conditions of exploitation. The pressures of capital affect everyone from white collar to blue collar and the various sectors of part time work. Former conditions of employment are being eroded and replaced by the insecurity of casualisation. This situation of the deterioration of the standard of living and social conditions will result in massive struggles, and these struggles will no longer be held back by Stalinism. In general this analysis is not controversial and it could be considered that he is outlining accurately the situation of capitalist development in the 1990’s. But the problem is that he does not allow for the opposing tendencies that have to modify this impression of seething discontent. He has to allow for the role of the offensive of capital in the 1980’s that led to important victories for capital and so discredited the very importance of militant trade union struggle. The working class is reluctant to engage in struggle because of this background and context. Furthermore the pressures of capital are often imposed on the sections of the working class that are the least organised and so are unable to resist the imperatives of capital. The offensive of capital has meant increasing layers of the working class are not organised in unions. This means the discontent with capital does not take an explicit political form. However what is possibly crucial is that because a mass socialist party has not been formed in this period, the result has been that the potential represented by the discontent with capital is not expressed in the form of mobilisation and struggle. But the situation is unfavourable for the development of a socialist party because of the ideological influence of the standpoint of the triumphalism of capital.

Consequently Slaughter’s view that the Marxist party is going with the stream of history is not confirmed by the balance of class forces that are unfavourable to the prospect of intensified class conflict and the prospect of socialism. Instead the task of a Marxist party is not to indulge in fantasy thinking about the situation maturing for revolution and communism but instead to understand why the situation is presently upholding the interests of capital. This is why capital is able to enforce its imperatives of intensified exploitation without the discontent created by this situation becoming transformed into organised opposition. The situation is favourable for the continuation of the offensive of capital in the 1990’s. It is not necessary to utilise the anti trade union laws because the unions are already in a state of effective impotence and so they have to accept the imposition of worsening working conditions in a passive manner. But the impact of the offensive of capital can be modified to some extent by the material advances represented by globalisation and so this means that the offensive of capital can actually take the form of the introduction of a limited role for class compromise and the introduction of concessions to the working class. However this situation only contributes to the discrediting of the notion of militant struggle because it seems that any social improvements are because of the action of the state and the advantages represented by capitalist development. The standpoint of Marxism is reduced to the views of a few isolated supporters and so Slaughter’s view that the isolation of Marxism is coming to an end is a travesty of the actual situation and is based on the approach of combing myth with actual facts. The major myth is that the working class is prepared and willing to engage in struggles with capital. This assumption cannot be sustained with facts and therefore can only be upheld by the role of a party ideology that is increasing based on rejection of the awkward truths of the actual situation.

He also suggests that the objective material basis for role of Social Democracy, which was based on the super-profits of imperialism – is ending. The historical conditions for Social Democracy are exhausted: “The options are exhausted. It is no longer possible to rule through the ‘bourgeois workers parties’.(16) This standpoint is based on the view that the prospects of reformism are over. The result has already been the development of left-wing trends and the attempt of Scargill to create a principled type of Labour party. However this will fail because the only type of party that corresponds to the situation will be a principled socialist party that understand the period as one of intensifying class struggle and the possibility for socialism. It is very dogmatic for Slaughter to claim that the era of reformism is over because of the importance of changes within capitalism and the intensification of its situation of crisis. What has to be understood is that the most important component aspect of reformism is the trade union bureaucracy and its role has not been undermined by the decline and crisis of capitalism. Instead the position of the trade union bureaucracy has actually been strengthened by the defeats of the workers in relation to the offensive of capital. The moderation and rejection of militancy of the trade union leaders has become influential and the more militant approach of people like Scargill has become discredited. Hence the trade union bureaucracy is a powerful bulwark of the approach of class compromise. However it is true that the reformist character of the Labour party has effectively ended because of its adaptation to the offensive of capital against labour and the adoption of a neo-liberal ideology. The programme of the welfare state and state intervention has been replaced by a standpoint that is uncritically in support of the interests of capital. This means the Labour party is no longer a bourgeois workers party and instead could be called a bourgeois liberal party.

With this reactionary regression of Social Democracy the situation seemed to be receptive for a massive split between New Labour and the labour movement. This did not happen. The alliance between New Labour and the trade unions was not undermined, and globalisation enabled the government to make some social concessions to the working class. Aspects of reformism were implemented despite the ideological rejection of reformism. Furthermore the parties that were established as an alternative to New Labour like the Socialist Labour Party were limited because of a lack of inner party democracy and their theoretical limitations. The SLP was for nationalisation by the state and so favoured a bureaucratic conception of socialism and was opposed to genuine democratic socialism. In this situation Marxism remained isolated from the working class and the political relation of New Labour to the labour movement was maintained despite some tensions and problems. The perspective of the offensive of capital continued to be successful under New Labour and the result was the intensified exploitation of the working class within the relations of production. Thus for Slaughter to argue that reformism was over has some historical justification, but it is also a one sided approach that cannot provide for an adequate strategy during the period of the rule of New Labour.

Despite all these problems of his analysis of social reality and related strategic limitations, Slaughter makes the powerful point that the process of social transformation can only be the result of the self-action of the working class. The type of society that we would consider to be a genuine alternative to capitalism can only be realised if it is the expression of the collective activity of working people. This suggests that the activity based on the supremacy of the party elite, or of an enlightened minority within the existing state, cannot realise socialism. This means that Slaughter makes a welcome contribution to the differentiation of Trotskyism from any conception of party revolution that would suggest the role of the working class is passive when compared to the dynamism of the party. Hence the importance of the party is to contribute towards the development of a strategy that would promote the capacity of working people to act in a manner that can realise the process of socialist transformation of society. It is necessary to reject any schema that would justify the party substituting itself for the role of the working class. This means that the in the process of transition to socialism it is necessary to reject any differentiation between the state and working people that would mean nationalisation is carried out by an elite that becomes a bureaucracy that is not accountable to society. Instead the process of development of the plan that is based on nationalisation has to be under the supervision and control of working people, and this is why the nationalisation of Stalinism was not socialism. This was the state nationalisation carried out by the role of a party elite, that ensured that working people could not define and determine what was happening. Only when the working class establishes its organs of economic and political power to supervise the process of transition to socialism can we accept that this is a genuine expression of the development of society in a socialist manner. The process of self-activity of the working class during revolution has to be continued in the era of the transition to socialism because the alternative is the construction of a society that is not socialist.

Slaughter’s approach towards the task of party building is connected to the view that the disillusionment with the New Labour government will create the mass basis for the formation of a socialist organisation: “A new party can be built in and through the mass movements which this historic shock will produce. And for those struggles we must prepare with the utmost urgency.”(17) The problem with this prediction is that it was not based on an accurate understanding of social reality, as already mentioned. There were more reasons to think that the New Labour government would have a honeymoon period and that people would be prepared to support it after many years of Tory rule. In this situation the prospects for the realisation of a new party would be unfavourable rather than encouraging. It would also be foolish to rely on the possibility that mass struggles would promote the conditions for the formation of the new party. These struggles would be likely to be few and would be undermined by isolation. In this context it was necessary to elaborate a different tactic that would promote the formation of a new party in these unfavourable situations. Slaughter was being principled when he suggested that half-way houses would not be sufficient and that the aim was not the creation of centrist organisations that fluctuated between reform and revolution. However the central question still remained: how was it possible to establish a revolutionary party in unfavourable conditions? The only conceivable answer to this question was to accept that a process of unification between the various Marxist groups was necessary and that this would involve compromise in the development of a common programme. However unity could have possibly been realised around support for the strategy of the socialist offensive and the self-emancipation of the working class. The centrality of these two aspects would indicate that Workers Press would not have to dilute its principles in relation to the success of the task of creating a new socialist party. What had actually happened was that the process involved in the formation of the new party had been modified by events and the importance of relations with other Marxist groups had become emphasised.

One of the implicit notions of Workers Press’s original conception of the building of the party was that it was based on the view that the dynamic of the struggles would mean a party could be formed in a manner that would by-pass the role of the traditional Marxist organisations. It was an implicit assumption that a party could be created that did not have a relationship with the Socialist party, or SWP. This assumption may have had validity if the perspective was sound but it was not. Instead actual developments meant both the few struggles and the forces of Marxism were isolated. Consequently the crucial question was how to overcome this isolation by the unification of the forces of Marxism and socialism. This task was ultimately recognised in relation to the formation of the Socialist Alliance. This could have become the basis of a principled Marxist party. It was also at this time that the approach of Workers Press to party building was being falsified by actual developments. An era of mass struggles was not occurring that could have nourished the process of the creation of a principled socialist party. The aim of the creation of a party that was based on the forces of the working class was noble and principled but it was being proclaimed in a period that was not favourable to this prospect. In this context a compromise should have been supported which was to recognise that modification of the character of party building had to be encouraged. This meant that whilst it may have been preferable to try and create a party out of struggles, the fact was that few struggle were occurring that could promote this possibility. However the falsification of perspectives did not mean that an alternative was not possible, and that was provided by the generation of the unity of the various Marxist groups. This process of unification would not necessarily end the isolation of Marxism, but it would mean that Marxism was enhancing its possibility of relating to struggles when they developed in the future. It was important that impatience and subjectivism should not undermine the development of united Marxist party. This development was not what was preferred but it was that which was possible under the circumstances.

However Slaughter did not accept this prospect, and instead justified his sectarian stance in terms of the view that the struggles of the working class would generate the socialist consciousness necessary to promote the development of a new party. This was an assumption that was questionable not only because of the lack of struggles but also because not many struggles have resulted in the formation of socialist consciousness. We do necessarily have to agree with Lenin that only trade union consciousness can be produced by strikes to recognise that struggles do not in themselves produce the required socialist understanding that results in the formation of a socialist party. This standpoint underestimates the importance of Marxism in the formation of a new socialist party. Furthermore it was because of the unfavourable conditions of the class struggle that meant the connection between struggle and the formation of a party was tenuous and problematical. In contrast, Slaughter insisted on the correctness of the following formula: “Along this path we came to understand that if a party is to be formed able to lead the class in the struggle for socialism it cannot be a group putting itself forward to the class as its vanguard party. It must be, rather the vanguard of the working class forming itself into a party. In other words it cannot be a party supplied to the working class, but a party of the working class, constantly building from that vanguard.”(18) The basis of this standpoint is that the structural crisis will create the conditions for the formation of a mass party, and this is related to the view that the spontaneous aspects of struggles are connected to the generation of socialist consciousness.

It has already been outlined why the development of the structural crisis of capitalism does not automatically result in the development of mass struggles. However we can also suggest that Slaughter has a one-sided conception of the relation between crisis and political events. It is possible for crisis to emerge without the result being the intensification of the class struggle. What we have to understand is the historical aspect that becomes the background to crisis. If the working class has a period of victories and success of militancy the onset of crisis in terms of increased inflation or slump can promote struggles as occurred in the 1970’s. Inflation is most likely to generate struggles because this leads to disputes involving wages. On the other hand if crisis is expressed in terms of recession and increased unemployment the working class is more likely to adapt to the situation and it is difficult to develop struggle. The situation in the mid 1990’s was actually one of increasing boom and this meant the overall decline of capitalism was being offset by a period of upswing. Hence it seemed that the era of crisis might be over even if this has proved to be an illusory and over-optimistic standpoint. The point is that the working class became motivated by the prospect of better times and so accommodated to that situation in terms of the decline in strikes. This also meant the anticipated confrontation between labour and the trade unions never happened. Instead it is the present period that is creating the conditions for mass struggles because the ruling class can only try to resolve the crisis at the expense of the working class via the introduction of austerity measures and public expenditure cuts. However this does not mean that struggles will necessarily develop because the situation is influenced by the role of the trade union bureaucracy and the level of class consciousness. The arguments of the Coalition government that we have to tackle the problem of the national debt also have an ideological effect of undermining the promotion of militancy. The situation is also complicated by the legacy of important defeats in the recent period and there is a belief that the offensive of capital cannot be challenged. In order to make the argument for the development of mass struggles in the 1990’s, Slaughter had to ignore the importance of defeat in the 1980’s, and to argue that there is a reductive link between crisis and struggle. This assumption is very problematical. Hence he did not explain the development of tendencies that undermined the prospect of struggle. The actual lack of struggle also completely undermined his argument about the possible formation of a new party of the working class.

He also defends the view that the spontaneous socialist consciousness of the working class will generate the basis for the development of a new party. This is an extremely problematical standpoint because the outcome of past experience of the development of the class consciousness of the working class has not been the formation of a party. It can be shown that the mass struggles of workers have resulted in the formation of popular organs like the Soviets. But it would be unprecedented if these types of struggles led to the creation of a party with a developed revolutionary programme. Instead, for better or worse, the emergence of a party has occurred prior to the development of mass struggles. The crucial question then becomes how to relate the standpoint of the Marxism of the party with the aspirations of the mass movement. In contrast to this historical experience, Slaughter is trying to suggest that the working class by its own efforts can establish a Marxist party and that the task of the Marxist intellectuals will be to support this process. However what result in practice is that the struggles of the working class are given a socialist and Marxist colouration by Workers Press, even if they actually lack the sufficient class consciousness to deserve this label. Hence the dockers' dispute of the mid 1990’s was defined in these terms, even though it was probably more accurately described as being an expression of militant trade union consciousness. In other words, Workers Press over-estimated what the working class could achieve in terms of struggle and underestimated the role of the existing Marxist organisations. They considered it elitist for the existing Marxist organisations to take initiatives in relation to the party question, and so were indifferent to the objection that it was unlikely that the working class would be able to create the necessary party. The result of this adaptation to spontaneity meant that Workers Press tended to glorify what were the limitations of the mass movement and to also over-exaggerate the apparent limitations of party vanguardism. In practical terms this meant Workers Press did not have an active role in the formation of the Socialist Alliance.

The point being made is that we cannot encourage the development of spontaneous class consciousness in terms of the tendency to ignore its limitations and problems. It is also necessary to recognise that it is a manifestation of complacency to assume that the working class will easily and harmoniously support Marxism as the outcome of their struggles. Thus for these reasons it is necessary to recognise that the development of a party will occur prior to the generation of mass struggle. This means that the crucial task is to relate Marxism to the mass movement in a principled manner and for Marxism to provide strategic guidance to the class struggle. This process does not have to represent an imposition from outside, or an elitist intervention. Instead Marxism can be compatible with the mass movement because its approach is both realistic and principled. In contrast, the standpoint of Workers Press was unlikely to become the basis of revolutionary leadership because it was not based on a realistic assessment of the class struggle and instead was economic reductionist and superficial. These limitations were not corrected and the result was crisis because of the falsification of the perspectives of Workers Press. They did not have an adequate strategy that could relate to the mass movement in a principled manner. Nor was the working class able to resolve the actual crisis of Workers Press by forming a new party. The initiatives of the dockers that were praised by Workers Press were actually based on the influence of this organisation within the strike committee. In practice Workers Press were carrying out a vanguard intervention. Their own political practice undermined the emphasis they gave to the socialist aspects of spontaneous consciousness. In practice they did not confidently envisage that the dock workers could develop socialist consciousness without their guidance and supervision. Hence at the level of practice they undermined their theory of the importance of spontaneous consciousness. But it could also be argued that their practice was understandable because of the very flaws and limitations in the theory that socialist consciousness could be developed without the intervention of Marxism. This standpoint was always untenable and bound to be contradicted in practice. It is also necessary to recognise that Workers Press contradicted their own standpoint to the extent that they established an interim organisation to campaign for the new party. This suggested that the forces of Workers Press were prepared to intervene within the class struggle in order to propagate and advocate the organisation of a new party. To this extent they understood that the dynamics of spontaneous struggle are not sufficient to create a principled party, and that the role of existing organisations will be necessary in order to promote the development of the necessary revolutionary grouping.

However it cannot be emphasised sufficiently that the major problem with their standpoint is the view that the development of mass struggle will result in the creation of a new party. Their analysis was dependent on the actual generation of struggles. This led to the constant conflation of reality with the role of prediction. The impression was created that mass struggles were already occurring or about to occur. This standpoint was a travesty of the actual situation and could not explain what was happening within objective reality. In establishing a perspective we have to be aware of the tendencies that could contradict and undermine this perspective. Workers Press were not aware of these problems and instead conflated illusions with reality. This does not mean that their conception of the situation in terms of the structural crisis of capitalism was wrong, but rather that their interpretation of the possible political effects of this crisis was limited and flawed. The result was a prediction of the intensification of the class struggle when the situation was characterised by an unfavourable balance of class forces and a low level of disputes. Furthermore their approach could only predict immense confrontations between the working class and New Labour when factors were emerging that modified and challenged this perspective. Consequently this pamphlet of Slaughter was not a programme for the era of globalisation.

Despite this criticism, the actual platform adopted by Workers Press was quite principled. It called for the development of a Marxist organisation on the basis of internationalism and adherence to the self-emancipation of the working class. If this platform had been related to more adequate perspectives it is possible that the actions of Workers Press could have made a contribution to the resolving of the crisis of leadership within the working class. But the problem was that the perspectives were based on imaginary reasoning that attempted to justify what was not happening as bound to occur. Hence the understanding of the structural crisis was considered to be the cause that would only result in definite and inevitable results. It was not recognised that crisis can have a diversity of effects and complex outcomes that are often difficult to predict. Ultimately the New Labour government did become a government of crisis but this was for reasons that were almost impossible to predict, the development of tensions at the level of international relations. This indicated that crisis is not only economic and can also have geo-political characteristics. However Marxism was unable to benefit from this situation because of its very inability to resolve the party question and so was unable to provide a united organisation for people to support. Workers Press had proved right to the extent they understood the urgency of the party question. The failure to resolve this issue meant there was no effective alternative to New Labour, apart from the return of the Tories. This is what happened in 2010. New Labour had not been defeated by the struggles of the working class. Instead it had become historically exhausted and was replaced by the establishment alternative in a period of increasing economic crisis. Ironically it was in the period 2008-10 that the structural crisis of capitalism was manifested in its most concrete terms. The dogma of Workers Press meant that its analysis of the crisis was premature and dogmatic. Hence they could not understand the tempo of the class struggle. Thus because of their dogma and impatience, Workers Press is defunct and unable to become part of the Marxist challenge to the policies of the ruling class. Its history is a sober reminder of the necessity to develop accurate assessments of social reality and to try to comprehend the actual balance of the class forces in the most objective manner. We should not try to equate predictions and aspirations with reality. However it is fair to recognise that the rest of the Marxist left was not free of the faults of Workers Press.

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