DOES RED FLAG HAVE A PRINCIPLED ACTION PROGRAMME?

The action programme of Red Flag is outlined in their 'Where We Stand’ article, which is presented in each issue of their monthly paper. (1) The programme begins with a declaration of opposition to austerity and cuts in services. This standpoint is obviously supportable, but what is not outlined is a strategy in order to realise this demand. Hence the call for the creation of a mass movement in opposition to austerity is not made, and the perspective of a general strike in order to end austerity is not elaborated. Instead the assumption is that a future Labour government will implement this demand. This standpoint is fatalistic and passive, and effectively rejects the necessity to develop the struggle against austerity in the immediate situation. It is also crucial to recognise that the development of mass opposition to austerity should be connected by Marxists to promoting support for the conscious aim of an offensive for socialism. In this context the immediate aim of ending austerity is related to our long-term task of advancing the possibility of the realisation of a new society without exploitation and material want. In contrast, Red Flag make a call for an end to austerity without connecting this aim to long-term tasks. This means they are effectively differentiating between a minimum and maximum programme.

Consequently, it is not surprising that Red Flag outlines its maximum demand for a socialist planned economy without any connection to the necessity for struggle to realise it. The point is that the aim of nationalising the top monopolies, and the development of a planned economy based on workers control, requires a strategy to realise this aim. Instead they call for the creation of a society economy without outlining the process of its realisation. Hence they describe this future economy in the abstract. “Draw up a socialist economic plan through mass direct democracy, matching production and distribution to popular need not private greed.”(2) This view is a worthwhile understanding of what socialism could be like, but such a definition is not connected to a recognition that the role of popular organisations will be required in order to promote the possibility of its realisation. Instead the emphasis in the concluding section of the programme is on the role of a Labour administration acting as a workers government. This prospect cannot be dogmatically excluded, but the potential for this development is based on the working class acting dynamically and intransigently in order to become the bulwark of a workers government based on the Labour Party. The point is that this perspective cannot be merely an expression of a majority in Parliament, but is instead crucially connected to the working class acting to create organs of participatory and popular democracy, or Soviets.

In other words the programme of Red Flag implies that a Labour government will be able to act on behalf of the working class as a workers government. Hence the call for action by the working class is based on the view that a mass party – presumably the Labour Party – will support the role of this workers government: “We need a mass party committed to revolution, which will mean the forcible dispossession of the ruling class through direct action from below, breaking the unelected apparatus of coercion, taking power in the hands of workers councils and a working class defence force.”(3) However, what is not recognised is that the development of genuine class struggle could acquire ambitions and aspirations that go beyond the more modest aims of a left-wing Labour government. The point is that this Labour government could only become a genuine workers government if it accepted the militant logic of the mass movement, and began to support its demands. Unfortunately, this issue of the relationship between the Labour government and the mass struggle is not addressed by Red Flag. Instead this question is outlined in terms of almost distinct realms of reality – the activity of the Labour government in comparison to the role of mass action. Thus what is not explained is the relationship between the left-wing administration and the militant movement. For example, is the mass party, which is related to the popular activity, different from the Labour party; or does Red Flag admit that they have a distinct character, and therefore an independent Marxist party is still required in order to promote a revolutionary process that the Labour Party is reluctant to endorse? Hence, what red Flag does not seem to allow for is that even if the Labour government becomes a workers government, this situation is not sufficient to realise the success of the revolutionary process? This question is not satisfactorily answered by the ambiguity of the approach of Red Flag.

The programme also outlines worthwhile demands for building social housing, investment in health, and work or full pay. Democratic demands are included such as the call for a republic, and proportional representation, plus national self-determination for Scotland and Wales. The problem is that this democratic and reform programme effectively requires revolutionary change in order to implement it. Hence the tension in the approach of Red Flag is that these minimum demands are not connected with a satisfactory explanation of how they will be realised. Furthermore, the foreign policy demands such as Britain out of NATO, and an end to imperialist wars, can only be realised if a revolutionary government with mass support is established. This government will be prepared to end the political logic of capitalism because it is based on a different logic which is the aim of ending the domination of capital over society. Hence the realisability of this collection of demands depends on whether it is realistic to conceive of a left-wing Labour government as an anti-capitalist workers government. In other words is the possible future Labour government nothing more than an instrument for the limited modification of capitalism, or can it become a genuine instrument of revolutionary change? This programme of Red Flag assumes that the latter possibility is realistic, but historical experience suggests that the Labour government will accept the domination of capital over society. In this context, the struggle to implement the programme of Red Flag implies the necessity to develop intransigent mass struggle against the limitations of any future Labour government. This means the vital question concerns whether popular working class support can be obtained for the programme of demands of Red Flag.

Consequently, the vital aspect of the programme of the Red Flag concerns the issue of the democratisation of the Labour Party. The point being made by Red Flag is that bringing about the effective rank and file control of the Labour Party will imply the possibility to establish a socialist constitution that will guide the actions of its members. The accountability of Labour MPs and trade union officials on the basis of regular recall, will transform these organisations and make then subject to the wishes of their members.(4) This process of change within the Labour Party and trade unions implies that they can become effective instruments of the process of promoting the goal of socialism. Obviously the type of political and democratic changes advocated by Red Flag can have an important effect in making the party accountable to its members. This process has already been started with the election of Jeremy Corbyn and the development of Momentum. But there are two important aspects that undermine the realisation of this optimistic perspective. Firstly, is the durability of the reformist ideology of the Labour Party and the fact that it is effectively defined as a social democratic organisation. Thus it is not surprising that Labour Councils continue to implement Tory cuts, and do not present a militant alternative to the policies of the government. Secondly, if the Labour Party is to genuinely change this process of transformation must be connected to a progressive development in the consciousness and aspirations of the working class. Instead the influence of BREEXIT is generating nationalist moods within sections of the working class, and this means that the Labour Party adapts to this situation. For example, Tom Watson has promised that the Labour Party will support the BREXIT policy of the government when it is voted upon in parliament.

In other words the right-wing trends within society means that this situation is not presently promising for the Labour Party to develop in a left-wing direction in the short-term. In contrast to this realistic assessment of the political situation, Red Flag claim that: “Today hundreds of thousands of young people are changing British politics. Soon millions can change Britain. All together we can bring down the Tories and open the road to a working class government and a social revolution.”(5) This complacent perspective is being defended in order to uphold the view that pressure caused by the radicalisation of important sections of society can bring about the formation of a Labour government that is effectively a workers government. In reply we can agree that it is certainly true that sections of society are critical of its limitations and have influenced the success of Jeremy Corbyn. But the forces of right wing reaction are presently more significant, and this is why the election of a new Tory government is likely in the near future. This development could undermine Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, and result in a right-wing challenge. If this opposition was successful, the period in which the left-wing transformation of the Labour party was possible would have been reduced to a temporary period, and without long-term effects. However, the more important point is that we cannot uphold an over-optimistic perspective that the Labour Party could form a workers government. Indeed, it is necessary to make the point that the present programme of the left-wing of the Labour Party amounts to the state capitalist modification of the capitalist system. They certainly do not support the programme of Red Flag. Hence a revolutionary programme is unlikely to be implemented by any future Labour government. This is why we have to continue the struggle to build a Marxist party that can strive to build the influence of a revolutionary programme and strategy within the working class.

(1)Red Flag, Where We Stand, September 2016 p2

(2) ibid p2

(3) ibid p2

(4)Ibid p2

(5) ibid p2