DEVELOPING A CREDIBLE PERSPECTIVE FOR SOCIALISM

It would seem that realising socialism in contemporary capitalist societies has become almost impossible. The support for the genuine transformation of society in terms of the aim of socialism is very low and there are no longer important and significant parties that attempt to realise this objective. Instead, it would seem that the capitalist system is invincible and is not likely to be replaced by the alternative of socialism. This unfavourable situation is the context in which it is necessary to evaluate the feasibility of the arguments being made in favour of socialism. Does this justification of the aim of socialism also address the difficult circumstances in which the attempt to realise this objective is an important problem that raises serious questions about the credibility of the attempt to realise this alternative to the domination of the capitalist system? But, despite these difficulties, there are still some committed intellectuals who continue to argue in principled and serious terms about the necessity and possibility to realise a socialist alternative to capitalism. One of these individuals is Michael Lebowitz who outlines a serious perspective for the realisation of socialism in his book: *The Socialist Imperative from Gotha to Now* (Monthly Review Press, New York 2015). He is committed to the objectives of a revolutionary Marxist approach and who considers that despite the setbacks in realising socialism it is still possible and realistic to aspire to achieve this aim. We would agree with the general perspective of Lebowitz, but what has to be established is whether he underestimates the complexities involved in the attempt to realise this aim. The point is that the history of the attempt to realise socialism has increasingly become reduced to the more limited objective of the aim of the modification of capitalism in reformist terms. Hence the various revolutionary critics of this approach have become marginalised and insignificant and most importantly it would seem that the working class is a declining social force that no longer has the economic or political capacity to transform society radically. Therefore, these types of issues represent important challenges that have to be addressed if the credibility of the justification of a radical and socialist perspective is to be established. Lebowitz is aware of the significance of the challenges posed by the attempt to try and realise socialism. He comments, ”What are we waiting for? There are many reasons why people do not move to put an end to capital. One, to which Marx pointed, is that capital tends to produce a working class that sees capital’s logic as self-evident natural laws, that is as common sense. Another idea is the belief that there simply is no alternative to capitalism, an idea strengthened by the experience of attempts to build socialism in the last century, including their ultimate retreat to capitalism. Both have contributed to the death of our dreams; and, without the dream of an alternative, there will be no struggle to end capitalism.” (p8). But it could also be suggested that the various attempts to create socialism have ultimately resulted in the development of various forms of exploitative and repressive regimes that seem to be inferior to capitalism in relation to the attempt to realise human aspirations. Instead, it would seem that capitalism, despite its various limitations, is the system that is most able to realise individual objectives of material and social progress. In other words, within the context of the exploitative character of the relations of production the workers can still organise in collective terms to realise their interests and in this way obtain material concessions from the capitalist economic system in terms of increased wages. However, this possibility can never realise the basis of the liberation of the producers from the domination of capital because this seems to define the very character of the relations of production. Hence: “The working class in capital is a product of capitalism” (p20). Therefore: “In capitalism the worker exists to satisfy the need of capital to grow. Within the capitalist workplace, people are subjected to ‘the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose’” (p21). But how can the worker achieve liberation given this apparent subordination to capital in almost definitive terms?

In Marx’s *Capital* the character of capitalism as a system of the exploitation of labour is outlined in extensive terms and the perspective of the transformation of this situation seems to be limited to the comments made in a famous statement: “Along with the constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates, who usurp and monopolize this process of transformation, the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows, but with this there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production….The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.” (Marx: *Capital,* volume 1, Penguin, London: 1976, p929). But this comment can only become the basis of the development of an analysis of the possibility for the workers to act against the domination of capital and in this manner achieve a situation of emancipation. Primarily what is not established in relation to this essentially economic analysis is the importance of the role of ideology and the related possibility of the political defenders of capitalism to be able to convince people of the necessity to accept the economic system because of the claims that it is the most efficient type of mode of production that could be established. So the workers and their parties will also have to oppose the ideological claim that capitalism is the most practical and feasible system, and so the possibility of alternatives are not credible. But the dogmatic approach of Marx instead suggests that the development of the collective opposition of the workers to the capitalist system is a necessary and inevitable expression of their situation within capitalism and so the possibility of revolutionary struggles that aspire to end the domination of capital will become an inevitability. However, we know that this prediction of the development of the collective struggles of the workers against capitalism has often been falsified by the actual events of the political situation and it seems that the defenders of the present system have been able to effectively oppose most possibilities for revolutionary change. This does not mean that Marx’s analysis of the economic exploitation and domination of the workers has been falsified by events, but instead that the results of these aspects have been more complex than the outcome of the prediction made by Marx about the probable success of a process of revolutionary change. But possibly the most important aspect of the events of political history of the workers has been the emergence of parties that aimed to reform the present capitalist system rather than attempt to establish the prospect of a revolutionary transformation into its alternative. This aspect has been connected to the role of the trade unions of the workers which attempt to obtain improvements in the situation of the workers within the present limits of the capital-labour relations. In other words, we can say that in theoretical and logical terms it was quite plausible for Marx to suggest that the collective and cooperative character of labour would result in the possibility of development of conscious opposition to the domination of the role of capital. But in empirical terms the feasible prospect of this type of outcome has been undermined by the actual capacity of the forces of capital to prevent the development of this type of conscious opposition. Furthermore, the parties of the workers which could have been expected to have revolutionary aims based on the support of the approach of Marx have tended to increasingly oppose this perspective in favour of reform of the present system. In this context the spontaneous struggles of the workers which have often had militant objectives have not been as influential as the role of the reformist parties in ensuring that the aims of the workers do not challenge the continued domination of the capitalist system. Therefore, the approach of Marx is partly right, the collective character of the role of the workers does result in mass actions of opposition to the domination of capital, but these developments do not logically result in forms of the revolutionary rejection of the capitalist economic and political system.

However, Marx in *Capital* also seems to develop a different conclusion that raises important problematical questions about the possibility for labour to end the domination of capital within the relations of production: “Precisely because capital appears necessary, in the normal course of things capital can rely upon the workers dependency upon capital. Increasingly, capital tends to produce the working class it needs, workers who treat capitalism as common sense.” As Marx explained in *Capital*: “The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist mode of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance.” (p28). In other words, capitalism is a system that tends to generate a situation of acceptance of the domination of this mode of production within the very class of the people who are exploited by this type of economy. Indeed, given this situation, it would seem that all forms of opposition are generally going to be ineffective and will not undermine the mass acceptance of the validity of capitalism. It could be argued that this observation of Marx is more plausible than his prediction of collective opposition to the system by the workers. Therefore, he seems to outline two apparently incompatible predictions. On the one hand that capitalism is able to utilise and organise the collective role of the workers for its own aims of increasing profits and the development of the process of accumulation, and on the other hand that this aspect will facilitate the increasingly effective opposition of the workers to the economic objectives of the capitalist system. In order to evaluate these two contrasting predictions, we will also have to establish the aspect of the ability of the supporters of the present system to be able to oppose and defeat any attempt at revolutionary change. Therefore, it could be argued that the aspect of the potential to realise revolutionary change based on the cooperative role of labour has been superseded by the ability of the defenders of the capitalist system to be able to uphold the supremacy of the present social formation. The point is that it is more difficult to develop a collective consciousness of opposition to capitalism within the workers than it is to organise the defence of the system by its supporters who have the advantage of being in control of the economic and political aspects of society. However, does this complex situation mean that the possibility of genuine change is almost impossible? This is not the conclusion made by Marx, rather that it is difficult to develop the prospects for social transformation given the importance of the economic and political domination of society by the capitalist class. But the problem is that he does not develop a strategy of change based on his analysis of capitalism. Instead, it could be suggested that Marx makes the assumption that at a certain moment in time the workers will organise in order to realise their cooperative potential. Therefore, it could be suggested that instead of outlining a strategy to realise change there is the expression of the vague hope that the cooperative character of the role of the workers will generate the possibilities for this potential to be realised in terms of the success of class struggle. It was various important followers of Marx who had the task of developing a strategy of change. But ultimately it could be argued that this task became undermined by the increasing acceptance by the various socialist parties of an acceptance of capitalism as the basis to obtain improvements for the workers. This reformist standpoint was justified in terms of the necessity to adapt to economic and political changes within capitalism. But the problem was that this approach was totally unsatisfactory in relation to the task of realising socialism, and instead capitalism was accepted as the only valid economic system. The forces supporting the objectives of revolutionary Marxism were reduced to small groups that increasingly lacked any popular support. However, this political development meant that it was possible for capitalism to continue because it was not opposed in any effective manner. Therefore, the issue is how is to become possible to re-develop the influence of a revolutionary approach within the working class? Is this task essentially unrealistic because the workers are not likely to have ultimate revolutionary aspirations, or does the continuation of the cooperative character of the role of the producers mean that such a possibility is not an achievable objective? In order to answer this question, the issue of understanding the class character of the workers will have to be addressed in a manner that goes beyond the limits of the brief views outlined by Marx.

The point is that the importance of the cooperative character of the role of the workers within a capitalist economy does not establish the importance of the full complexity of the aspects involved in being able to determine the possibility for the workers to become conscious opponents of the domination of capital. Not only is it generally the situation that capital is able to impose its supremacy because of the dependence of labour on the role of the capitalist in order to obtain a wage as the basis of livelihood, but there is also the importance of the aspect of bourgeois ideology which acts to consolidate the domination of the economic system based on the exploitation of the role of labour. Hence there is the significance of the fact that the ideological defenders of capitalism try to justify the situation of the exploitation of labour because such an aspect is held to be of mutual benefit to the members of society. Furthermore, there are the political parties of the workers which generally prefer to support the continuation of capitalism as the basis to obtain improvements to the situation of the people. In this context the influence of revolutionary parties which genuinely advocate the importance of transition to socialism often have insignificant influence within the population. Therefore, even if people can be discontented with the aspects of the role of the exploitation of labour by capital there are also these important reasons why this does not result in conscious opposition to the continued domination of capital. In other words, it is difficult to translate any spontaneous discontent with the capitalist system into becoming the conscious expression of support for a credible and genuine perspective of the transformation of society. Indeed, it could be suggested that any opposition to aspects of capitalism is based on the importance of the rejection of these limitations rather than being the articulation of rejection of this system in terms of support for a credible social alternative. Thus, this means that the aspect of mass discontent is based on criticism of the present system rather than being the articulation of an alternative that could replace the ascendency of capitalism. In other words, the workers are essentially formed by the capitalist economic system and so it is logical that they consider that it is durable and cannot be changed in a revolutionary manner. But it could be suggested that Marx underestimates the complexities involved in relation to the issue of change because of his understanding that the cooperative character of labour will mean that the process of the transformation of society becomes an inevitable result of this aspect of the role of the workers. However, this very understanding is also contrasted with his awareness that the very character of the working class is based on the expression of the interests of capital: “The worker produces not for himself, but for capital. It is no longer sufficient, therefore, for him simply to produce. He must produce surplus value. The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes towards the self-realisation of capital.” (Marx: Capital volume 1 p644) Therefore how is this situation to become transformed so that the workers act in a manner that is no longer an expression of being an appendage of capital? It could be suggested that Marx has no definitive understanding of a process of change, but he instead merely implies that the workers will ultimately act to transform this situation. But we can suggest that what is required is that the workers act to try and realise an aspect of control within the capitalist system that is able to then create the possibility for this development to become consolidated in terms of the effective realisation of workers management of the means of production. However, as we have outlined this development will not be a spontaneous development but will instead be connected to the increasing influence of the role of a revolutionary party that advocates this type of perspective of the revolutionary transformation of the economy. But the general lack of success in terms of the development of the increased influence of a Marxist party means that there is no conscious expression of this type of perspective of the necessity to establish workers management of the economy. Therefore, the workers are limited to the development of various forms of defensive strikes that do not in any manner challenge the continued domination of capitalism. It seems that the possibility to transform the character of the economic system is essentially an impossible task that cannot be realised in successful terms.

However, this conclusion is pessimistic if we consider that the importance of the role of a revolutionary party can transform the situation. This is because the intervention of this type of organisation means that it can promote the role of a perspective that is able to connect the cooperative character of labour to the aim of the transformation of society. However, it could be suggested that it is unrealistic to suggest that this type of party will be successful in its task of developing support for the aim of the transformation of society. However, this problem is not because of the lack of credibility of this type of political perspective but is instead because the various left wing political organisations are divided into a collection of competing groups. The result of this situation is that it seems to be more credible for the workers to continue to support reformist political organisations that have popular levels of support and have the possibility to become the government of the given country. In other words, the perspective of the necessity to realise the cooperative character of labour in a progressive manner has not been discredited by the arguments of the opponents of this position. Instead, it merely seems that the defenders of capitalism are able to establish an effective level of support for their objective of adherence to the aims of the present economic system which seems to imply that the possibility to realise the aim of an alternative type of society seems to be a very problematical issue. However, Lebowitz seems to ignore the difficulties of this issue of the transformation of society in terms of the realisation of the democracy of the producers and instead assumes that this aim will ultimately be supported because of its superiority to capitalism in terms of the conscious and actual development of a genuine cooperative form of production: “In short, in the process of producing consciously for others, people are transformed. In the course of their activity, there is a joint product – the rich human being “in which his own realisation exists as need”. In that process, our need change. Instead of filling the void left by alienated production with things, our activity itself becomes “life’s prime want” because activity and enjoyment become one. This relation, in which we produce consciously for others and do so to the best of our ability, not only advances the needs of others and ourselves for full human development, but also by reducing the tendency for consumerism, is the necessary condition “for the existence and reproduction of the chain of human generations”.”(p37-38) However, the problem is how the aspect of the alienated and exploitative character of the capitalist economy will be overcome and replaced with a different social system? If these aspects are what define capitalism and the role of the producers who are integral to this type of economy, then it has to be assumed that the very character of the workers is defined by these aspects. They are alienated and so have difficulty in being able to envisage the possibility of being able to act in order to liberate themselves from this situation. Therefore, it is not sufficient for Marxists to outline the importance of this condition of alienated labour, but they also have to develop the credibility of a programme of action that would develop the initiative of the workers to be able to overcome their situation of alienation and exploitation by capital. However, it could be argued that this type of strategic understanding was never effectively indicated in terms of how the workers could act to undermine the situation of the domination of capital and so facilitate the possibility of the generation of different and emancipatory relations of production. Marx in his ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’ as Lebowitz indicates, was critical of the view that the bourgeois state should provide financial support for the development of producer cooperatives that would begin to transform the economic character of society. But Marx does not seem to have provided a strategy by which the possibility for the realisation of the cooperative aspects of production within capitalism can be established in more consistent terms in the context of the development of a new and distinct social formation. Instead he only outlines the principled aspects of the cooperative character of a new socialist society: “This is how the new society develops upon its own foundations by creating new organs for the cooperatively planning the distribution of society’s labour in order to satisfy “the workers own need for development” and by doing so not through a state standing over and above society but rather through democratic institutions “completely subordinate” to society…By creating the conditions through which people are able to develop all of their potential – that all-sided “rich individuality” – through their activity, the new society develops productive forces specific to a society of associated producers….as the Critique indicates, is that “the productive forces have increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly.”(p70-71) But this analysis merely indicates some principles of the character of a society that could replace capitalism, what is not established by Marx is how to transform these cooperative aspects into becoming the expression of a different and non-exploitative type of social formation. In other words what is not outlined is how the class character and role of the workers could be expressed in the development of genuine support for a strategy of change that would realise a different society based on the principles of solidarity. Instead, there seems to be the dogmatic assumption that the aspects of the cooperative character of labour under capitalism will be consistently expressed in the creation of a different socialist society. But the very importance of the exploitation of labour by capital is an indication of the difficulties involved in trying to establish a different type of society. The problem is that this aspect results in the continual generation of the subordination of labour to capital within the relations of production and the result of this situation is a consistent failure to develop an adequate and effective strategy for the liberation of the role of the producers. Furthermore, the various socialist parties often fail to develop a perspective of change that could facilitate the development of the political conditions that would enable the producers to overcome the domination of capital. In this context it is necessary to create a strategy that would establish in convincing terms why it is possible for the forces of labour to overcome the ascendency of capital within the relations of production. But instead of the development of this perspective Lebowitz only outlines the principles of the reasons for change in terms of ending the exploitative character of the role of the capitalist relations of production. This means that whilst it is established that it is morally unacceptable for the forces of capital to exploit labour for the advantage of the system, the problem is that what is not indicated is how labour can overcome the apparently consolidation of the situation of its domination within the relations of production. Indeed, it could be suggested that this problem has been inherited from Marx who seemed to express similar limitations in his standpoint. Therefore, Marx was critical of the reformist limitations of the Gotha programme but at least the authors of this policy suggested that this standpoint was a valid perspective in terms of the possibility to change the economic and political character of society in terms of the expression of the development of the influence of the working class within capitalism. In other words, the criticism of Marx did not outline a perspective for the transformation of society, but instead suggested that the bourgeois democratic character of the political system was not conducive to the possibility of a gradual process of change. The effective result of this problem of strategy was that the Social Democrats effectively ignored the views of Marx and instead acted to promote an approach of reformism that would generate the possibility of transformation to a socialist type of society. In other words, there were two unsatisfactory political opposites. There was on the one hand the dogmatic approach of Marx, who would suggest that capitalism could not be reformed in the interests of the workers and on the other hand the increasingly pragmatic approach of the Social Democrats who suggested that an approach of reformist change would ultimately result in the realisation of a process of the socialist transformation of society. These limitations meant that the Social Democrats increasingly accepted an approach that was concentrated on what could be realised within capitalism which was in the interests of the workers. Thus, it could be suggested that the development of an emphasis on what could be achieved within capitalism was an expression of the limitations of the various perspectives of change to socialism. But this problem was actually an indication that this manifestation of accommodation to capitalism was because the elaboration of a perspective of change that could realise socialism was never adequately developed. Instead, the reformist approach of Kautsky defended a perspective of gradual change within capitalism becoming the basis of an inherent process of transformation to socialism. Only the mass strike approach of Luxemburg indicated the possible connection of the dynamism of the struggles of the workers with the possibility to achieve revolutionary change. This approach reconnected the relation of means and ends in the mass movements of the workers. But this perspective never become dominant within the working class and instead the standpoint of reformism become the most influential approach.

However, Lebowitz tries to deny the importance of the ideological influence of reformism in relation to understanding the actions of the workers. He suggests that the aspect of struggle defines what the workers are: “Those who conclude that the working class is not a revolutionary subject because capitalism has changed the working class reveal that they do not understand the ABC’s of Marxism. The working class makes itself a revolutionary subject through its struggles – it transforms itself. This was always the position of Marx – his concept of revolutionary practice which is the simultaneous changing of circumstances and self-change. The working class changes itself through its struggles. It makes itself fit to create the new world.” (p143) But if this understanding was literally correct it would be difficult to explain why the successful realisation of revolutionary change has proved to be a very difficult and complex process. The perspective of Lebowitz implies that almost any expression of mass struggle will result in the possible successful realisation of revolutionary possibilities. But this outcome has only occurred in very exceptional terms. Instead, the general outcome of mass struggle is the problem of maintaining the dynamism of this form of action given the superior ability of the ruling class to consolidate its domination and to defeat the various forms of mass discontent. Only the connection of the mass struggle to the role of a genuinely revolutionary party, as in 1917 in Russia, enabled the possibility of successful change to be realised. But in general terms this connection of a mass movement with the role of a Marxist organisation has not been realised and so the spontaneous dynamism of the forms of class struggle have not resulted in the transformation of society. Obviously some mass struggles have been successful, but this is in terms of obtaining wage increases or other limited demands, and the possibility to connect such mass actions to the aim of revolutionary change has not been realised. However Lebowitz seems to ignore the importance of the historical results of mass struggles in terms of their generally limited successes and instead considers that in some inherently dynamic manner they can result in change because of the possibility to develop dynamic social actors capable of transforming society: “Struggles are a process of production: they produce a different kind of worker, a worker who produces herself as someone whose capacity has grown, whose confidence develops, whose ability to organize and unite expands. Moreover, we should think that this is limited to wage struggles. Every skirmish in which people assert themselves, every battle in which they push for social justice, every struggle to realise their own potential and their need for self-development builds the capacities of the actors.” (p144) But if this perspective was literally true it would be difficult to explain why successful revolutionary change has not generally resulted in the transformation of capitalist society. Instead, it has to be suggested that most forms of mass action are based on the attempt to realise limited objectives such as an improvement in the conditions of the workers within the capitalist system. The most effective manner in which this situation can be changed into becoming an expression of a more conscious process of opposition to the domination of capitalism is to develop the influence of a principled revolutionary party. But the problems involved in developing the mass character of these organisations has undermined the possibility to establish this dynamic relation of party and class. Hence there is a situation of the crisis of leadership of the struggles of the workers which means that the connection of these mass actions to the role and influence of revolutionary organisations is not established. This means that any possibility to develop a conscious opposition to the continuation of capitalism is not realised.

However, Lebowitz tries to deny this conclusion because he does try to suggest that the very spontaneous dynamism of the various mass struggles generates the possibility of opposition to capitalism and the related prospect of revolutionary change: “And these struggles bring us up against capital. Why? Because capital is the barrier that stands between us and our own development…. If we are to satisfy our needs, if we are to develop our potential, we must struggle against capital and, in doing so, we working people create ourselves as revolutionary subjects.” (p144) But this perspective has not been realised in general terms because of the various economic and ideological problem that undermine the development of collective action in favour of the possibility of radical social change. Hence, it is necessary to establish the important role of a revolutionary party which can advocate the importance of a strategy of the mass mobilisation of the workers in favour of the realisation of a genuine transformation of the character of society. But the lack of the influence of these organisations has meant that the collective aspect of the role of the workers remains a potential expression of the possibility of revolutionary change that is not realised in most circumstances. Indeed, in an inconsistent manner Lebowitz accepts the difficulties involved in developing the possibility of successful revolutionary change when he comments: “Capital has been winning the battle of ideas by convincing us that there is no alternative, and those who dismiss the working class as revolutionary subject reinforce this message. We can fight the battle of ideas, however by stressing our right for self-development.” (p145) Thus there is no convincing perspective of the possibility of radical social change and instead only a vague hope that the collective character of the workers will ultimately be realised in terms of the development of actions that result in the emancipation of labour. But the problem is that there is a difference between possibilities and their actual realisation. We can agree that labour has a cooperative character that expresses the genuine possibility to establish united actions in favour of the transformation of the economic and political aspects of capitalism. However, there is a distinction between potential and its actualisation. Therefore, this contradiction indicates the very necessity to develop the important role of a revolutionary party which can promote the objective of the transformation of society in terms of the realisation of the interests of the workers. In other words, the problems involved in the attempt to overcome the domination of capitalism is that there has often been no connection of the possibilities of the collective role of the workers with the development of a progressive political influence of the role of a left-wing party. This situation means that people generally assume that the most that can be realised in order to improve their circumstances is to try and obtain improvements within the present system. But Lebowitz does not seem to be interested in the importance of these aspects which seem to undermine the possibility for the realisation of change. Instead in general he outlines how the importance of bourgeois ideology can be undermined by the development of collective struggle. In general, we need to recognise the possible truth of this understanding but also that the prospect of genuine success of the activity of the workers requires the transformation of society which is a complex task that has ultimately not been successfully realised in relation to the empirical fact of the continuation of the domination of capital. Indeed, the apparent possibility of genuine collective social change seems to have become so problematical that people have increasingly begun to question the prospect of this development being a credible possibility. Certainly, we have to accept that this prospect of change has become complicated by the apparent stability of the capitalist mode of production, but the situation can be transformed if we attempt to successfully create a popular form of the revolutionary party that can outline the importance of a perspective of social change in a credible manner. Therefore, the issue that Lebowitz establishes in terms of the workers recognising the importance of their self-development cannot be separated from the necessity to develop the role of a party that would be able to promote the role of this aspect of collective activity. But the problem has been that the attempt to establish the importance of this type of party has been an historic failure. The result of this situation is that the aim of socialism which a principled party would be able to advocate is not influential because of the apparent inability of any of the genuine revolutionary organisations to become an important expression of the possibility to articulate the aims of the workers.

Indeed, the general optimism of the approach of Lebowitz seems to be contradicted by the following comment: “Despite the intensification of capital’s class war against the working class, despite capital’s insistence that workers must bear the burden of capital’s own failures, the workers see no alternative than to try to say ‘no’. No to cutbacks, no to austerity, no to new user changes, no to the destruction of our lives and our environment. But not yes to the socialist alternative. Faced with the living nightmare of twenty-first century capitalism, workers have seen no apparent alternative other than to mitigate the damage, individually or collectively. This is the tragic result of the destruction of the dream of socialism that has occurred in the twentieth century.” (p157) But he suggests that despite this problem the very development of the role of the mass struggles of the people can being about the reinvention of the aim of socialism. This is because the actions of workers in forms of action can create a type of moral economy that generates the possibility of the expression of an aspiration for an emancipatory alternative to capitalism: “So even though the moral economy of the working class is not an immediate challenge to exploitation, it can be the basis for a process by which the workers themselves change in the course of struggle. This, then is the possibility inherent in the concepts of right and wrong and of fairness characteristic of the moral economy of the working class. It is the possibility of building upon those existing beliefs to the point of challenging exploitation and the system itself directly.” (p162) But the problem is that this importance of a moral protest about the aspects of inequality and the exploitation of capitalism will only develop a consistent and articulated character in relation to the elaboration of the aim of socialism by the role of a socialist party. This is the basis to transform spontaneous opposition to capitalism into becoming the basis of support for an understanding of the genuine alternative expressed by the aim of socialism. Obviously, the collective actions of the workers express the possible potential for progress to be made towards the realisation of the aims of the development of a more egalitarian type of society, but there is still the necessity for the important intervention of a revolutionary party in order to elaborate the credibility of the aim of socialism. The failure to develop the influence of these parties has meant that the possibilities expressed by the collective struggle of the workers is not realised. In other words, the struggles of the workers occur in the context of the continuing influence of the domination of bourgeois ideology which has meant that the aims of these mass actions do not aspire to go beyond the limits of the present system. Lebowitz implies that these issues can be resolved by the elaboration of various values and aims which are consistent with the character of socialism and so the development of support for these aims will express the increased potential to realise this objective of a different and more emancipatory aspect than the importance of the effective defence of the capitalist system. Indeed, Lebowitz accepts that the possibility to develop the influence of socialism is a complex issue. In other words, he accepts that the various struggles against aspects of capitalism do not automatically result in the development of popular support for a revolutionary alternative: “Even with a certain resistance marked by struggles over wages, working conditions and the defence of past gains, as long as workers look upon the requirements of capital as “self-evident natural laws”, these struggles occur within the bounds of the capitalist relation. In the end, workers subordination to the logic of capital means that faced with capitalism’s crisis they sooner or later act to ensure the conditions for the expanded reproduction of capital.” (p178) However in an important sense Lebowitz recognises what is necessary in order to oppose the continued influence of the role of capitalism even in relation to the important aspect of the spontaneous actions of the workers. There is no political and ideological substitute for the elaboration of a conception of a credible form of socialism. In this manner the role of the mass actions of the workers could acquire a different character, because no longer is the aim merely to defend interests within the context of the continuation of capitalism. Instead, what is necessary is to outline and popularise what could be defined as a credible conception of socialism.

But an important point to establish is that the very activity of the workers in opposing capitalism is an integral aspect of developing the principles of solidarity and collective action that are necessary in order to establish the possibilities for the development of a different type of emancipatory society: “Marx was most consistent on this point when talking about the struggles of the workers against capital and how this revolutionary practice transforms “circumstances and men”, expanding their capabilities and making them fit to create a new world.”(p180) But the problem with this aspect is that what is being developed is only a general potentiality. What is apparent is only a possibility for the collective actions of the workers to become the basis of the development of a different type of society. In virtually all these situations the possibility to transform potentiality into actuality is not realised. Therefore, it requires more effective ideological intervention of revolutionary parties in order to try and connect the aims of immediate struggles of the workers with the long-term objective of socialism. However, this is a task which these organisations have failed to do because they have instead preferred to be merely uncritical supporters of the various struggles of the workers. Indeed, it could be suggested that most of these Marxist parties have only the vague notion of what is meant by socialism. The result of these problems is that it is almost an inevitability that the various struggles of the workers are based on obtaining improvements within the capitalist system. There is no suggestion that the ultimate result of the actions of the workers should be to aspire to realise an alternative of socialism. Indeed, in this context the various Marxist groups become the most enthusiastic supporters of the role of mass action as being of inherent important value and so the importance of the ultimate aim of socialism is obscured as a result. Lebowitz seems to accept this situation when he praises the role of a party that merely acts as a support agency for the actions of the workers: “Rather than a body that sees itself as superior to social movements and whose members are meant to learn the merits of discipline in following the decisions made by infallible central committees, it implies a party that learns from popular initiative and unleashes the creative energy of the masses through their own practice.”(p181) But this understanding seems to reject the importance of leadership. There is no recognition that the spontaneous actions of the workers may be of a limited character in terms of the lack of a connection to the aim of socialism. Hence it is the ultimate role of a revolutionary party to try and connect these various forms of mass struggle with the recognition of the importance of the necessity to strive to advance the realisation of the objective of socialism. Hence whilst Lebowitz is right to suggest that parties should learn from the experience of the actions of the workers and incorporate this aspect into their politics, they also have to provide genuine leadership to these struggles. The point is that socialism will not result from some supposed inexorable dynamic of change. Instead, there has to be a process of interaction between the aspect of mass actions and the conscious role of a Marxist party which attempts to develop the influence of the role of a revolutionary perspective and programme. However, it has been the aspect of the failure of various Marxist parties to develop a situation of popular influence which has meant that the possibility to make progress towards the realisation of the aims of socialism has not been the outcome of the role of various mass struggles. But instead of the recognition of the importance of this aspect Lebowitz implies in vague terms that what is required is the elaboration of convincing conception of socialism. But the point is who will be the agency of this approach? In other words, it is not the realisation of the dynamics of spontaneous class struggle that will create the economic and political basis for the development of an alternative to capitalism. Obviously the potential of the various mass struggles can express the tendency for the prospect of the creation of an alternative system to replace capitalism. But if this potential is to be realised the aspect of mass struggles has to be connected to the explicit perspective of a revolutionary party and its elaboration of the character of the aim of socialism.

However, the problem is that Holloway discusses the issues of the attempt to realise the objective of the political power of the working class in order to create the conditions for a process of transition to socialism without a discussion of the role of the party. The assumption seems to be that the workers can spontaneously develop the conditions for the successful achievement of the situation of the possibility to transform society in a socialist manner. He outlines the issues involved in the question of the prospect of achieving revolutionary change without involving the role of the socialist party: “When capital is in crisis, there are always two options – to give in or to move in. If masses are armed with a clear conception of the socialist alternative, they can turn a crisis in capitalism into the crisis of capitalism. It is possible that, as the result of our ideological disarmament, the current struggles against the capitalist offensive ultimately may lead to a glorious defeat. It is possible, but we must take the chance.” (p202) But the point is that the prospects of the success of the workers in the class struggle are immensely improved if there is the development of the leadership role of a genuine revolutionary organisation that is able to promote the importance of a credible strategy that can facilitate the possibility to realise the possibilities for social change. The point is that there has been a number of situations for the workers to be able to realise economic and political power, but the result has been failure because of the lack of the influence of the role of a revolutionary party. Therefore, what is required is the role of a party that has a credible strategy that can facilitate the possibility for the militant actions of the workers to become the basis of the possibility to realise their economic and political power. In an ambiguous manner this point is recognised by Lebowitz when he comments: “Rather what is needed is a political instrument that recognizes the importance of building the strength of the working class. It a party that can learn from people in motion and that can crystalise and bring back that knowledge to expand their capacity.” (p218) But this very task requires the leadership role of the party. This is because in order to facilitate the realisation of the potential of the role of the workers in the various mass struggles it is necessary that the party is able to promote the role of a convincing strategy that is able to connect the immediate aspirations of the people with the aim of the socialist transformation of society. In other words, the aspect that Lebowitz mentions of the issue of developing the potential of the workers has to be connected to an aim that would express this possibility, and that aspect is defined in terms of the elaboration of a type of society in which the potential of the people could be realised, which is socialism. But this perspective means the elaboration of a programme of change. How is it possible to make progress from the immediate situation of increasing discontent with capitalism to becoming the advocates of a credible perspective of the socialist alternative. It is in relation to this issue that it could be argued that the approach of Lebowitz is vague. Instead, it is essentially being suggested that the likely outcome is the development of a connection between party and class that will result in progressive and revolutionary change. But it this aspect which has historically been unsuccessful. The majority of parties claiming to support the aspirations of the workers have tended to be reformist supporters of the capitalist system and so have effectively rejected the aim of the socialist transformation of society. Whilst Stalinism supports a bureaucratic opposition to capitalism and so in that manner does not facilitate the genuine expression of the possibility for human emancipation. Hence the social democratic and Stalinist organisations have had an important role in the undermining of the development of the possibility for the realisation of the possibility for genuine human emancipation. Whilst the parties that have genuinely expressed an adherence to the aim of socialism have been generally insignificant and unpopular. The result of what is a crisis of working class politics is that the system of capitalism has tended to remain dominant and stable because of the importance of these problems involved in the creation of an effective role of a genuinely revolutionary party. But how is a credible and principled socialist party to be created. It could be argued that Lebowitz does not sufficiently address this issue.

But there is possibly an even more important problem. Did Marx establish the credibility of the perspective of socialism? In other words, within the works of Marx is the argument made for the possibility to establish a socialist and communist society in convincing terms? This issue will be addressed by a critical evaluation of the work of the International Communist Current who produced the booklet: ‘Communism, not a nice idea but a material necessity’ (2007) They argue that the very dynamics of the class struggle continually express the possibility to realise the aim of communism: “It also follows that if communism is not a utopia invented by well-intentioned reformers, but the real movement of the proletariat, then it must have a history as well as a future. Communism is the necessary goal of the class movement, its ultimate point of attraction; but the nature of this goal and the means to achieve it have been continuously clarified in the living laboratory of the proletarian struggle.”(p8) This is a dogmatic assertion because it could be argued in response to this approach that the aim of communism has been the outcome of the theoretical understanding of what should be the logical culmination of the struggles of the workers against aspects of the exploitative character of capitalism. Therefore, is communism a logical expression of the dynamics of the class struggle, or is it instead an unnecessary perspective that has nothing to do with the actual aims and objectives of the workers in relation to the development of opposition to the domination of capital over labour? In other words what is the relation of the aim of communism that is promoted by Marx and Engels to the class struggle? Is there is compatible connection of the intellectually defined aim of communism with the actual dynamics of the actions of the workers, or instead is this aim merely a theoretical imposition that has nothing to do with the actual activities of the proletariat in relation to the development of its opposition to the exploitative character of capitalism? In a certain sense Marx could only answer this question in a positive manner because obviously the credibility of his approach was based on the establishing of the ultimate connection of the development of the class struggle to the objective of communism. But we would suggest that this perspective is an intellectual expression of theory and so the prospect that the aim of communism becomes the expression of the aspirations of the workers ultimately depends on the apparent credibility of this objective in intellectual terms. This understanding does not mean that there is something false about the aim of communism, but instead it is not the outcome of the spontaneous development of the class struggle of the workers. Instead, there is the necessity to connect the aspirations of the immediate actions of the working class with the attempt to establish that communism is a logical outcome of the development of this increasing mass action against capitalism. This understanding is defended by the authors: “Communism is the real movement, and the real movement is the movement of the proletariat. A movement which begins on the terrain of the defence of material interests against the encroachments of capital but which is compelled to call into question and ultimately confront the very foundations of bourgeois society.” (p13) But this conclusion would seem to be dogmatic because it does not have any important expression in terms of the role of class struggle which seems to be about the expression of the immediate interests of the working class within capitalism. Hence communism is an intellectual aspiration that is utilised in order to suggest that the actual class struggle of the workers should aspire to go beyond the importance of immediate issues and demands. This means that the credibility of communism depends on how it has been theoretically constructed as an expression of what should be the ultimate and most principled outcome of the role of the class struggle. But if the workers reject the necessity of the aim of communism as the aspect of the outcome of their struggles then it could be suggested that this objective is reduced to being nothing more than the objective of intellectuals. The point being made that there is nothing inherently unprincipled about the aim of communism being the theoretical expression of the views of intellectuals. In other words what is important is whether the objective of intellectuals in terms of the theoretical elaboration of a genuinely superior alternative to the exploitative limitations of the capitalist system. However, the crucial issue is whether this perspective can acquire popular support and so become the basis of the expression of a genuine mass movement that would aspire to achieve change in this manner. The point being made is that there is no necessary connection between the actual developments of the class struggle and the aim of communism, contrary to the assumptions of Marx who argued in favour of this relationship. Instead, it is the very important role of the communist party to develop the arguments as to why the movements of the workers should adopt the aim of communism.

But in a sense the approach of the ICC seems to deny the importance of the role of the necessity to develop conscious and popular support for the aim of communism and instead emphasises the importance of the increasing stagnation of the productive forces under capitalism which creates the possibility for the transformation of this system into socialism. They suggest that the economic system is defined by aspects of decadence which indicate the development of its contradictions and increasing generation of the possibility of decline. But how does this approach establish the possibility for the realisation of social change? The point is that it could be suggested that capitalism is likely to undergo periods of economic crisis and tendencies for decline without this meaning that the present economic system is likely to be overcome and replaced by a socialist alternative. Instead, it could be suggested that capitalism will continue to be defined by the expression of aspects of decline because of the contradictions of its economic system. However, it could also be suggested that the very importance of the exploitation of labour by capital enables the system to develop the surplus value and profits that enable the system to continue to function in effective terms. But the ICC claims that Marx disputes this conclusion and instead contends: “But he does all this…scientifically demonstrating that the system of wage labour must lead to these ‘excesses’; that the proletariat cannot mitigate its sufferings by relying on the goodwill and charitable impulses of its exploiters, but only by offering a dogged, organised resistance against the day-to-day effects of exploitation …..In short the theory of surplus value proves the necessity, the absolute unavoidability, of the struggle between capital and labour, classes with objectively irreconcilable interests.”(p108-109) However it could be suggested that all that is established with this analysis is the aspects of the different interests of the workers and capitalists because of the aspect of the exploitation of labour by capital in the process of production. This situation does not mean that inevitable revolutionary and progressive change will be the result of this aspect. But the ICC tries to ignore the importance of this issue by suggesting that the economic contradictions of a capitalist system will create the conditions for a process of change to occur: “In short, the crisis of overproduction, which can no longer be attenuated by a new expansion of the market, exposes the fact that the productive forces are no longer compatible with their “capitalist integument”, and that this integument must be “burst asunder”. The fetishism of commodities, the tyranny of the market, must be overthrown by the revolutionary working class, the only social force capable of taking hold of the existing productive forces and orientating them towards the satisfaction of human needs.”(p114) But these perspectives do not indicate the connection of the aspect of the role of the exploitation of labour by capital in the economic system with an inevitability of the intensification of the class struggle and the related generation of the possibilities for change to occur. Instead, it could be argued that the workers may accept this situation, and so tend to aspire to achieve improvements within the present economic system. In other words, there Is indicated no dynamic of the development of the aspiration for revolutionary change in order to realise the potential of the cooperative character of labour. Instead, this standpoint is a vague perspective that is outlined in dogmatic terms rather than being based on a convincing conception of the possibilities established by the role of cooperative labour within the process of production. Thus, it could be suggested that neither Marx or the ICC are able to connect the cooperative aspect of labour with the development of the possibility to transform this aspect of the process of production into becoming the basis of different relations of production. Only later supporters of the aim of workers control were able to establish this type of perspective of the transformation of the character of the economy in more effective terms.

In other words, it is not adequate in strategic terms to merely emphasise the importance of the realisation of the cooperative character of production in terms of the management of the economy by the activity of the producers. Instead, we have to outline a strategy by which this possibility can be realised. The point being made is that we have to develop a perspective that can establish how the aspect of the domination of capital over labour can be opposed and challenged by the development of the activity of the producers to try and realise the possibility of workers management of the economy. But it could be suggested that this aspect was neglected by Marx and instead he seemed to be content to suggest vaguely that the cooperative character of labour would be fully realised in the development of a situation of the economic and political ascendency of the workers. In other words, a strategy for the transformation of the character of the relations of production was not outlined by Marx. But if the capitalist relations of production express an effective and efficient mode of production in terms of the establishment and consolidation of the domination of capital over labour, how can this situation be transformed. Marx has the general and obvious perspective that the workers need to be successful in the class struggle, but how does this cliché indicate the possibility to end the domination of capital over labour? It was necessary to develop the understanding of the cooperative character of labour in strategic terms so that this aspect becomes the basis to develop a strategy for the transformation of the domination of capital over labour into becoming the basis for the liberation of the producers. But instead of this elaboration of a perspective of change it seems that Marx was content to praise the development of the Paris commune when the workers of Paris acted to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoise because of the collaboration of this class with the invading German army. But what was important in this situation was that the political supremacy of the Paris proletariat did not result in the progress of the aim of its economic liberation. The continued supremacy of the French bourgeois class occurred despite the development of the political ascendency of the workers in Paris. In other words, under the situation of the problem posed by the immediate threat of the opposition of the French bourgeois army and the Prussian forces the Commune could not be anything more than the expression of a policy of survival that could not represent in any long term manner the conception of what is meant by the perspective for the emancipation of labour from capital. Therefore, the serious problems for the Commune in terms of the importance of the imminent possibility of the success of counterrevolution meant that this regime could not express a precedent in terms of what a revolutionary regime should be like. However, the commitment to popular democracy by the Commune was rightly praised by Marx as being an indication of what could be possible under more favourable circumstances. Thus, the historical importance of the Commune was that it indicated to the international proletariat that the objective of achieving the success of the role of revolutionary struggle against capitalism could be successful. But the unfavourable circumstances of the establishment of the Commune regime meant that it could not actually represent a precedent of what could be achieved by the establishment of a proletarian revolutionary state. Therefore, the mistake made by the various interpretations of the Commune, including that of Marx, was to suggest that this regime represented a model of what a proletarian revolutionary regime could be like. But the ICC suggests that the approach of the role of the Commune indicated what was both necessary and principled in terms of the expression of a genuine revolutionary strategy: “In fact the struggle to disseminate the real lessons of the Paris Commune, to keep the proletarian movement on the right track to the communist revolution, was already underway in the aftermath of the French workers insurrection.”(p137) But the realisation of the Commune was the unexpected result of the defeat of the French army by the Prussian forces. This outcome was not the result of the application of the role of a genuine revolutionary strategy for the realisation of political change. Hence the issue of the importance of a revolutionary strategy had not yet been established. Therefore, the development of the Commune did not represent any general strategic lessons for the successful realisation of the class struggle. This point only became understood in the increasingly reformist terms of the advocacy of a gradual conception of reforms as the basis to realise socialism. Only the development of the Soviets of the 1905 Russian revolution expressed the possibility to create a genuine revolutionary strategy for the overthrow of capitalism.

This understanding does not mean that the Commune was not a great historical advance in the realisation of the interests of the workers, but the point is that its realisation was not the result of the explicit success of a perspective of class struggle and was instead the outcome of the crisis of the French ruling class caused by the success of the Prussian army in the war of 1870. Hence it could not be suggested that the Paris Commune expressed any important strategic lessons. Instead, Marx was correct to outline how the various policies of the Commune indicated the possibility to make progress towards the realisation of the objective of the creation of a genuine socialist society based on the principles of participatory democracy. In theoretical terms what was possibly more important than this expression of solidarity with the role of the Commune, was the criticism of the Gotha Programme of the emerging German social democrats. Marx outlined in his critique that the aim of a people’s democratic state was vague, and which ignored the issue of the contrasting ascendency of capitalism or the establishment of a genuine socialist society. But the problem was that whilst Marx outlined what was opportunist in the approach of the social democrats, he did not establish what should be the objectives of struggle within capitalism. The point is that the replacement of the supremacy of the Prussian monarchy with a democratic republic would be an advance in the realisation of the interests of the workers and so would develop the political possibility to make advances in the possibility to realise socialism. In other words, a democratic republic would establish a system of universal suffrage that would enable the Social Democrats to develop popular support in favour of the development of genuine change and the prospect of the socialist transformation of society. The ICC outline Marx’s view that the only genuine form of transition to socialism is via the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. (p142-143) But this perspective implied that there was no possibility of the workers making political progress unless they are able to realise their political ascendency. In other words what are the workers to realise in terms of perspectives within the situation of the domination of capitalism. The apparent failure of Marx to address this issue led to a reformist interpretation of the perspectives of Marxism in terms of an emphasis on the role of the democratic republic as an end in itself. But Marx could have challenged this reformist interpretation of the perspectives for socialism in a more effective manner if he had outlined in explicit terms that the realisation of the role of the democratic republic could become the basis for making genuine advances towards the realisation of socialism. The ICC reject this conclusion by suggesting that the formation of a democratic type state under the domination of the bourgeoisie led to the creation of a coercive state that was used against the workers. This point is true, but it actually indicates the necessity for the workers party to strive to realise the formation of a genuine democratic type of society that would be based on adherence to the principles of the possibility of the involvement of the workers and their party in being able to influence the actions of the state. This development would not alter the fact that there was a bourgeois state but it would mean that the role of the socialist party would be to advocate the formation of a genuine democratic republic that could establish the influence of this political organisation and so be able to attempt to introduce reforms that could alter the balance of class forces in favour of socialist transformation. Marx was concerned that if a socialist party acted in this manner it might adopt the ideological approach of reformism. But this very problem could be overcome if the party continued to understand that its attempt to realise reforms was only principled if this aspect was connected to the primary aim of making advance towards the socialist transformation of society. The problem was that this approach was never consistently adopted by German social democracy and instead it increasingly defended a reformist approach. But the ICC are wrong to suggest that Marx had an effective alternative because he did not outline consistently what should be the political approach of socialist parties in the context of the continuation of capitalism. How should a socialist party act in a principled manner within capitalism? He rejected the aim of the democratic republic as being of an opportunist character but did not outline a strategic alternative approach in effective terms.

The ICC defend the essentially negative opposition of Marx regarding the justification of a reformist perspective concerning the objective of social change by commenting: “The notion that the workers can only be emancipated by the benevolent actions of an all-powerful state goes hand in hand with the idea of a party of ‘benefactors’ descending from the clouds to free the poor benighted workers from their ignorance and servitude.”(p145) But there was an alternative to this approach of elitist change by the role of a party that has obtained dominant influence within the bourgeois state. This more principled perspective would be that the workers and a socialist party would interact in order to facilitate the creation of a democratic republic that would express the possibility to be more amenable to the realisation of egalitarian objectives. This would not mean that an elitist approach is being justified, quite the contrary. Instead, only the interaction of the role of party and class could create an effective mass movement that would be able to develop the type of social power that would mean that even a democratic republic that was still based on the domination of capitalism would nevertheless become increasingly receptive to the realisation of the interests of the workers. This approach would only become opportunist if the aim of reforms became considered to be more important than the ultimate objective of socialism. In other words, only a recognition of the relation of the role of reforms and the democratic republic with socialist objectives would ensure that a principled perspective of change was being consistently supported. This would mean that the end of the democratic republic would be understood as merely a secondary objective in relation to the character of the perspective to realise socialism. But instead of this possible elaboration of his approach, Marx indicated the importance of his criticisms of the Gotha programme in terms of what could be considered to be an absolute contrast of the approaches of reform and revolution. The ICC are correct to suggest that Marx was right to reject the view that capitalism could become of benefit to the people in terms of the role of a government acting in these terms. (p145-146) But the problem was that he did not seem to offer an alternative except in the absolute sense of the creation of a socialist society. In other words, he seemed to reject the perspective of the creation of a democratic republic in order to facilitate the possibility of transition to socialism. The point is that opportunism is not the justification of the role of the democratic republic, but instead the emphasis on the importance of this objective at the expense of the aim of socialism. Therefore, it could still be principled politics to accept the importance of the democratic republic but only if this aspect was connected to the issue of making advances towards the realisation of socialism. In other words, the democratic republic could be based on the expression of the very objective of progress being facilitated towards the successful obtainment of socialism. But this is the very perspective that seems to be rejected by the interpretation of Marx being made by the ICC. The problem is that whilst we know what we are against, it is not obvious what should be the expression of a principled perspective of change. Obviously, the democratic republic will be based on the economic and political domination of the capitalist class, but this does not mean that the workers cannot act in order to undermine the importance of this aspect of the system. It would be opportunist to limit demands to what is acceptable within the context of the democratic republic, but this possible problem does not mean that it is inherently unprincipled to attempt to develop a strategy to achieve progress and advance for the workers within the context of this situation. Indeed, it could be argued that success in this context is what would make the possibility of transition to socialism a more favourable prospect.

The ICC criticise the various formulations of Marxists like Kautksy after Marx to separate an emphasis on the importance of realising political change in the immediate situation from the ultimate objective of socialism. This criticism is obviously valid in terms of the various opportunist limitations of the social democratic parties that increasingly adapted to the aspect of acceptance of the domination of capitalism. But what is not indicated as an alternative is how principled Marxist parties are to become politically effective in the context of bourgeois democracy and so be able to outline a credible strategy for the socialist transformation of society. It could be suggested that this issue has never been tackled by Marxists in an effective manner. However, one attempt to develop a credible perspective for change was that of the British Communist party which adopted its British Road to Socialism in the post-war period. The approach it adopted was that the role of the Communists was to critically support a left-wing labour government that would introduce measures that would begin the process of the transformation of society in terms of the nationalisation of major industries. However, the obvious aspect that the role of Labour governments was to consolidate the importance of the welfare state within the context of the continued importance of the development of capitalism seemed to create problems for this perspective of apparent support for a left-wing reformist approach. But the point is: did a revolutionary criticism of this standpoint provide a credible alternative? This issue will be discussed in terms of the evaluation of the programme of the CPGB made by Jack Conrad in ‘Which Road’ November publications, London 1991) The point to be established is whether the criticism developed by Conrad is a sufficient basis for the justification of a socialist perspective that is able to tackle the important economic and political issues posed by the situation since 1945. In other words, it is possible to criticise what could be considered to be the opportunist limitations of the various programmes of the Stalinist communist party, but does this type of evaluation indicate the aspects of a credible alternative? The point being made is that the major issue that needs to be addressed is not the limitations of a party that was becoming increasingly right wing and opportunist, but instead the problems of the forces that could be considered to be revolutionary Marxist. Indeed, it could be suggested that the very problem is that this type of criticism becomes the pretext to deny the necessity to evaluate the inability to establish the influence of genuine Marxist politics since 1945. It could be argued that the rise of the Militant tendency, which became the Socialist party refutes this point. But in fact, their influence was based on the opportunist perspective of the transformation of the Labour party into becoming an organisation for the expression of the role of a socialist government, and then the defenders of the view that the anti-Poll tax struggle could somehow transform the character of society. Thus, the very development of the influence of supposed Marxist politics has essentially been the defence of what should more accurately be defined as centrism and the rejection of the importance of genuine Marxist politics. However, the problematical issue is whether the various alternatives to these developments have been able to establish a genuine more principled possibility for the generation of truly socialist politics. In other words, is the actual problem more profound than the aspect of the opportunist character of a number of organisations. Is there instead a generalised expression of the inability of the various revolutionary groups to be able to develop an understanding of the various challenges of the economic and political situation in the recent period? However, the apparent unfavourable answer to this question is because of the lack of a credible perspective for understanding the various challenges of the class struggle. Hence the immediate issue to address is whether the approach of Jack Conrad is able to provide a perspective that is able to tackle the importance of these problems for the realisation of the possibility of the successful development of a socialist approach. The point is that it is one thing to criticise the limitations of various rival groups, but it is another thing entirely to be able to establish in that apparently negative manner what could be considered to be a credible alternative approach. This is what we have to consider in terms of the criticism that is being developed.

The analysis of Jack Conrad indicates that an important problem with the standpoint of the programme of the British Communist party is its nationalist criticism of the role of British capitalism which is criticised for opposing the supposed national interests of the people of the UK. Conrad comments that: “To be a British patriot today is to be a partisan of capital. The British state belongs to capital, capital dominates it, capitalists unite to protect it. The British state represents their collective interests against both the interests of the working class and the interests of foreign capitalists.” (p12) But the point is that this understanding is not shared by the majority of workers who instead tend to support a position of national pride in the role of the British nation state. In this context the alternative of the approach of internationalism is not popular. Indeed, the influence of nationalism has led to the popular rejection of the involvement of the UK state in the European Economic Community. (EEC) Thus the alternative standpoint of internationalism is not popular and as a result the expression of the ideology of socialism tends to be an accommodation to this nationalist approach. But this means that the interests of the British state are not even rejected by the advocacy of the perspective of socialism. Instead, there is an attempt to connect the aim of socialism to the continued importance of the role of the nation. But the result of this perspective is an opportunist and reformist perspective that is based on the view that the character of the British state should be merely modified in relation to the promotion of left-wing objectives. Indeed, this is the very approach of the traditional Communist party conception of the possibility to realise socialism. But the major problem is that the working class tends to have a nationalist approach. The influence of this standpoint is not something that is merely expressed by the political character of the programme of the traditional communist party. In other words, the communist party has justified a process of ideological adaptation to the popular views within the British working class about an adherence to the perspective of nationalism and the connected rejection of internationalism. Indeed, this aspect is defined by the very term: ‘A British road to socialism’. This ideological opportunism has to be rejected and a convincing alternative outlined which indicates why the process of the realisation of the prospect of socialism has to be an international approach based on the united class struggle of the workers of many different countries. But the approach of Jack Conrad does not seem to recognise the importance of promoting this more principled perspective in constructive terms. Instead, it is merely implied in relation to the opposition expressed to the approach of a British road to socialism. But the problem is that this criticism becomes dogmatic because the elaboration of a perspective of the process of the development of international class struggle is not outlined. Instead, the approach of Conrad is to outline the opportunist aspects of the British road to socialism without indicating the necessity of an alternative approach that would be the possible basis to overcome the important influence of both nationalism and reformism. The point is that the very lack of popular support for an internationalist and left-wing approach is important for the ability of capital to continue to dominate over labour. This aspect of the ideological hegemony of the ruling class has to be addressed by Conrad in a serious manner if he is to be able to outline the possible development of the influence of a left wing standpoint in convincing terms. Instead, he criticises the view of the programme of the British communist party for suggesting that the domination of the ruling class is connected to the ideological importance of obtaining consent for its ascendency: “Our task is not to defend bourgeois democracy and its parliament before the masses. On the contrary, our task is to expose through political struggle the fact that bourgeois rule is based on the ownership and control of the means of production, and maintained at the end of the day through terror and force.” (p17) This comment completely underestimates the importance of the ideological aspect of the possibility for the ruling class to consolidate its domination over society. Indeed, it could be suggested that ideology is the major aspect for the possibility of the capitalists to be able to justify their economic and political supremacy. Hence it is necessary for the revolutionary socialist party to engage in a process of ideological struggle with the defenders of the capitalist system if the possibility of the development of increased support for the aim of socialism is to be realised. Indeed, it could be argued that the very aspect of the role of coercion of the bourgeois state can only be upheld as a result of the process of ideological justification of this aspect of the process of the administration of society. Without this aspect of consent, it would become increasingly difficult to justify the ascendency of capital in political terms. Therefore, the very task of the attempt to obtain increased support for the revolutionary perspective of socialist change, requires as Gramsci suggested, a development of ideological struggle that would facilitate the possibility to undermine the ideological hegemony of the ruling class. In other words, the dynamics of the class struggle are not sufficient in order to establish the political conditions for the development of the possibility of revolutionary change. Instead, the ideological influence of the approach of the capitalist class has to be opposed by the expression of a perspective that is based on the necessity to develop the possibility of social change. However, it could be argued that the possibility of the success of this task is undermined by the apparent inability to develop successful and important revolutionary parties.

Indeed, the approach of Conrad is to even reject the possibility of alliances with left reformists as being unprincipled. He concludes in dogmatic terms that: “Only the successful war against reformism (of all varieties) by a genuine Communist party will take the workers struggle for socialism forward.” (p50) This rigid approach denies the importance of tactics in relation to the attempt to create an effective and influential revolutionary party. The point is that it is important to put the ideology and practices of the left reformists to the test of the critical perspectives of the supporters of the revolutionary approach. Such an approach would actually involve the possibility to advocate alliances in terms of the importance of objectives that could unite revolutionary and reformist forces on the basis of the aim of developing the increased effectiveness of the workers in the class struggle. Hence the mere rejection of the role of the left reformists is a negative and ineffective approach that is unable to convince anyone of the necessity to support a contrasting revolutionary standpoint. Instead, united front activity in order to facilitate the development of the political activity of the workers would represent a more constructive approach. But this aspect would only become unprincipled if the revolutionary forces accepted the programme of the left reformists. Instead, the issue of unity would be about the attempt to develop the class struggle. Instead of this flexible and principled approach the programme of the British communists is criticised for even suggesting the possibility of unity with the left wing of the Labour party: “The Labour left is in fact part of the problem, the Communist party is the solution. One of the key tasks of the Communist party is to split away the electoral base of the Labour party. This might or might not be done using the tactic of forming a united front (an alliance) with Labourites. Nonetheless at the end of the day to win the workers to communist consciousness the ideas of reformism in all their varieties must be defeated. The communist party must triumph in the minds of the working class.” (p51) It is contradictory to both suggest an alliance with the left of the Labour party and to also contend that this force is politically problematical. Indeed the only consistent conclusion is the following view that the only principled approach is to establish the uncontested ascendency of the role of the communist party: “Only through being won to the leadership of the Communist party – guided as it is by the scientific world outlook of Marxism – can the working class transcend trade union and left Labourite consciousness (a form of bourgeois consciousness) and realise itself as a class for itself as opposed merely to a class in itself.”(p51) What is being suggested is that the approach of left wing Labourism has nothing progressive about its political character and so any alliances between these forces and the genuine communist party can only be of a limited and episodic duration. But it would be more constructive and not unprincipled to try and develop an approach that was based on the perspective of how to construct a united front between the supporters of the left wing of the Labour party and genuine revolutionary forces. Indeed, it could be argued that this is the manner in which the possibility to develop increased support for the aims of socialism could be promoted in the context of the political situation of Britain. The possibility of such an alliance would not mean the undermining of the importance of the distinctive and independent character of the various revolutionary parties.

However, Conrad justifies a rigid understanding of the character of the Labour party in the following terms: “The Labour party should be defined first and foremost as a bourgeois workers party. Although it is based on the working class, on its trade union affiliates in particular, its leaders, its programme are thoroughly reactionary.” (p57) But this definition of the character of the Labour party does not explain the importance of the role of its left wing which, at various times. can generate the possible progressive development of this organisation. In relation to the development of the significance of the left wing the role of Marxists should be to provide critical support and to promote the aim of the transformation of the Labour party into becoming an organisation that is more receptive to the aspirations of the working class. This is not to suggest that the Labour party will become an adequate instrument of the possibility of social change but that it has an important role in the development of the political conditions that could facilitate the radical transformation of society. Indeed, Conrad and the CPGB quietly rejected the dogmatism of their initial perspective and effectively became uncritical supporters of the Corbyn leadership of the Labour party. Therefore, they have gone from being the justifiers of a dogmatic position to become the effective supporters of an opportunist approach. In order to try and avoid the opposing problems of opportunism or sectarianism we would suggest that it is necessary to develop an independent and critical evaluation of the policies of the Labour party. Any expression of a progressive approach should be supported in terms of the elaboration of how this aspect may contribute to the realisation of a socialist society. Therefore, it is necessary to reject the rigidity of the view of the Labour party as a bourgeois workers organisation that cannot change or to adopt the opposing error that it is a potential socialist party. Instead, we have to evaluate the Labour party in flexible terms in regard to the role of its present leadership and the policies that it has adopted. The influence of a generally radical type membership of this organisation has also to be entered into the calculations of the approach of revolutionary groups. Thus, whilst the Labour party can generally be considered to be a reformist type organisation, it is also capable of being influenced by the radical views of its active membership. This means that the approach of revolutionary Marxist organisations has to be responsive to the general trajectory of the Labour party. At present it has undergone a right-wing evolution with the election of Kier Starmer as its leader. This means it might be more principled to outline a perspective of the realisation of socialism that has a critical understanding of the role of the Labour party. Obviously, these right-wing developments do not mean that it is a principled approach to reject a perspective based on the importance of the Labour party. But the difficulties caused by the recent right-wing evolution of the Labour party have to be considered and explained when trying to develop a credible strategy of radical change. In other words, the issue of the connection of the Labour party to the progress of the objective of the realisation of socialism cannot be abstracted from the character of the dominant political evolution of this political organisation. The problem is that the character of the Labour party is generally defined by the role of its leadership because of the lack of a genuinely democratic and popular aspect to its actions. This means that an important objective is to support the possibility to make the leadership of this organisation accountable to its members. But without this development it would not be dogmatic to suggest that the political aspect of the attempt to create an independent revolutionary organisation still has importance. But possibly the primary objective of this party is to try and develop the generation of the process of transformation of the Labour party so that it becomes more responsive to the necessity for radical change. In other words, the more popular and effective does the revolutionary organisation become the more it is able to influence the actions and policies of the Labour party. Therefore, there is not a contradiction between the attempt to develop the importance of the revolutionary party and the necessity to establish its process of political interaction with the Labour party. The revolutionary organisation will maintain its independence in relation to the necessary process of trying to influence the policies and actions of the Labour party.

Conrad defines the significance of the communist party in rigid terms: “Only the Communist party can fight for the long term interests of the working class as a whole. Only through its class party, the Communist party, can the working class become a class for itself….Only the Communist party can enable the working class to operate strategically, to enter and break tactical alliances, to defeat politically the ideas of the bourgeoisie in our class and make revolution.”(p68) The logical conclusion of this approach is that the role of the Communist party is to replace the present dominant role of the labour party in regards to the aspect of working class politics. But it is questionable whether this is a desirable objective given that the Labour party has historically expressed the aspirations of people for the possibility of progressive social change. Nor can it be said to be realistic that the small groups of revolutionary parties would become the exclusive expression of the aspirations of the objective for radical change to the character of society. Instead, the outstanding challenge is to try and create the situation in which the Labour party becomes more responsive to the necessity to develop the potential for more principled actions in relation to the realisation of a process of advance towards the establishment of an egalitarian society. It could be argued that historically the Labour party has failed to become a principled expression of this type of radical objective. This point is true. But neither has it been possible to create a genuinely popular and effective form of revolutionary party. The sectarianism of the various left-wing organisations has undermined the possibility to create a Marxist party that would be able to obtain mass support. Instead, we have a situation of a reformist labour party and the contrasting situation of the decreasing importance of the small Marxist groups. Indeed, in the Blair years it could be suggested that the Labour party became a bourgeois party, and was not in any manner responsive to the aspirations of the people. It took the Corbyn leadership of the Labour party to change this reactionary situation and so establish a party with genuine reformist aspirations, but this development has been undermined by the onset of the Starmer leadership. But this situation does not mean that we should reject the importance of the role of the Labour party but instead should try to develop the more effective influence of its left-wing forces. The aim is to struggle to re-establish the connections of the Labour party with more genuinely radical objectives. Obviously, this task should not replace other aims such as the attempt to create a genuine and effective revolutionary organisation. Indeed, the more successful that this attempt to create a popular revolutionary party the more possible will it be to influence the policies and activities of the Labour party. But ultimately there is no substitute for the successful generation of the increased influence of genuine socialist ideas within the working class. Only in this manner will it be possible to establish a dynamic of change that will enable the development of the interaction of this aspect of increased radicalisation with the generation of the possibility for the socialist transformation of society.