HOW RELEVANT IS TROTSKY'S WORK ON BRITAIN?

Trotsky wrote an influential book: 'Where is Britain Going?' in the mid 1920's. (1) It led to controversy and fame for its author. He outlines a process of the economic decline of Britain from its position as the primary capitalist power to a situation in which the USA had become dominant. The capitalist class has no effective policy to try and change this situation, except in terms of the attempt to implement a deflationary policy of restoration of the gold standard and the lowering of wages. This situation resulted in the intensification of the class struggle and the radicalisation of the working class. Hence the process of the decline of the UK is accompanied with the possibility that a revolutionary situation will develop, Thus: “This general prospect requires us to ask above all the question: will a Communist party be built in Britain in time with the strength and the links with the masses to be able to draw out at the right moment all the necessary practical conclusions from the sharpening crisis?”(2) Of course, the radicalisation of the working class is connected to the world war and the development of the Russian revolution. A militant minority of the working class is openly sympathetic towards the Soviet regime. (However, Stalinism is starting to consolidate itself, and this is why Trotsky's publication is one of the last works formally permitted by the growing bureaucracy.) The increasing differences between the interests of the working class and the capitalists within the UK will mean that a direct struggle for political power is on the agenda. However, Trotsky is aware that the Labour Party, trade union leaders, and the CPSU elite may undermine revolutionary developments.

Hence the situation is becoming pre-revolutionary. We can contrast the past with the present. We can argue that the offensive of capital over the last forty years has had a profound effect on the consciousness of the working class. It is no longer possible to maintain that a militant minority based on anti-capitalist views is present. The radicalisation effect of the October revolution has been replaced with scepticism about the attempt to build socialist regimes, and alienated discontent with society has taken the form of nationalism. In this situation there is no Marxist organisation that is comparable with the early Communist party, which had extensive support within the trade unions and Labour Party. Instead the only aspect that is similar to the period that Trotsky is writing about is the continued decline of the economy.(3) Hence in the recent period we have not had a situation of regular strikes that represents the possibility of the development of class consciousness and the possibility of willingness to oppose capitalism directly. Instead globalisation has undermined the very possibility of the working class to act as a united class that is capable of challenging the power of capital. The only apparent expression of radical views is the strange phenomenon of the rise of Jeremy Corbyn to become leader of the Labour Party. In this context how is it possible that Trotsky's views could be relevant?

Trotsky is outlining the argument that the Labour Party is opportunist and is not suitable for the tasks of the intensification of the class struggle. A communist party will be vital. However, in the present it seems that the Marxist groups are unable to provide leadership and instead the only hope for genuine change is because of the left-wing leadership of the Labour Party. But, even this development is problematical because the Conservative government is adapting to the nationalist discontent by becoming a Bonapartist force that is determined to carry out the process of the UK leaving the EU in the most reactionary manner. It is sacrificing its historic links with Capital in order to have a strategy to ensure that they are able to retain electoral popularity, and in this manner they are prepared to act on behalf of capital. This possibility occurs because the working class becomes the mass base of this Bonapartist process. In this sense, the forces of capital have to adapt to a policy that they have not advocated. In contrast, Trotsky is suggesting that the Baldwin government of the mid 1920's has no strategy to uphold British capitalism in a situation of decline because it can only argue against socialism in terms of its supposed inferiority. Trotsky suggests this viewpoint is false, and this will be demonstrated by the political revolution of the working class: “Now at this moment Britain, like all capitalist countries, needs an economic revolution....But this future economic revolution – the rebuilding of the whole economy according to the socialist plan – cannot be achieved without a political revolution first.”(4) He is able to argue in favour of this perspective because of the signs that the working class is increasingly willing to strive to achieve this aim. In contrast the present working class of the UK seems nationally divided, and in England is prepared to support a reactionary Tory government because of its nationalist ambitions. Trotsky was aware that support for communism was still small, but he also knew that it was growing and providing an alternative to the reformist limitations of the Labour Party. However, in the present situation, the Conservatives are advocating a policy of promoting the national interest in order to gloss over the class contradictions of society. Whether they are successful, or not, cannot be determined in advance, but they are presently able to take advantage of low class consciousness. In contrast, Trotsky was appealing to an increasingly radicalised working class, and it was the ideological limitations of the Labour party that was the major issue undermining the development of a popular revolutionary standpoint. Hence he criticises the Labour Party for being deferential towards the monarchy and religion, and outlines how this standpoint meant an accommodation to the institutions of capitalism. In the present situation, the influence of reformism is declining because it is being replaced with populism and nationalism. Consequently, it would actually represent a progressive development if reformism of the left-wing Corbyn variety became the major problem to be tackled in the ideological struggle. Instead we have to argue in favour of class interest against that of nation. In other words, the different between the situation at the time of Trotsky's book and the present is that his context expressed political and ideological questions at a higher level. In contrast, we have to tackle issues that represent a decline in class consciousness since the 1920's.

Trotsky views are not irrelevant in terms of the fact that he recognises the significance of conducting theoretical struggle against the most important ideas that undermine the development of a revolutionary class consciousness. This task is still present, even if it is not carried out as convincingly when contrasted to the polemics of Trotsky. The strengths of Trotsky's approach are that he always tries to outline the issues in terms of a class analysis. But in the present situation, the question of opposing nationalism is often defined in terms of moral aspects instead of outlining how nationalism is against the interests of the working class. In other words the class character of the working class should be defined in terms of the antagonism of capital and labour, and so an alternative ethical view is a dilution of this understanding. Or as Meszaros suggests, the material basis of solidarity is connected to a conception of the similar conditions of exploitation by capital: “The genuine potentiality of shared values and strategic objectives by the working class as a whole can become actuality only when the feeling of reciprocity required for the promotion of a lasting and practically viable international solidarity arises from meaningful shared experience as far as labour's relationship to capital is concerned.”(5) Unfortunately the result of defeats within the working class has been the regeneration of national identity. This process was realised by the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU.

It would seem that Trotsky's book refers to a different age and a different working class. But the relevance of his work is based on the importance of the revival of Marxism if the present situation is to be transformed. Trotsky is outlining the importance of Marxism at a time when the working class is increasingly militant and sympathetic to the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society. The fact that there has been a regression of class consciousness since that period does not make Marxism irrelevant. Instead, if anything it indicates the increasing urgency of the role of Marxism in order to oppose the influence of bourgeois ideology. There is a necessity for Marxism to engage in more effective polemics in order to undermine nationalism and in order to develop popular support for internationalism. The present campaigns of Marxists are inadequate because they protest about reactionary attitudes and behaviour, but don't present the socialist alternative. Instead the assumption is that the modification of existing society is sufficient. This is precisely why Trotsky's book is relevant because he is insistent that the only logical answer to political problems is socialism. Furthermore, he connects the logic of class struggle to socialism. This is the alternative to the present popular support for nationalism.

Trotsky also implies that his perspective is the alternative to reformism: “MacDonald counterposes to the class struggle the idea of the solidarity of all those charitable citizens who are trying to rebuild society by democratic reforms. In this conception, the struggle of the class is replaced by the 'constructive' activity of a political party which is built, not on a class base, but on the basis of social solidarity.”(6) This is precisely the programme of Corbyn! To him the virtues of solidarity and co-operation are not complementary with the socialist transformation of society, but instead express a substitute perspective. The only standpoint that cogently connects class struggle, solidarity and socialism is that of Marxism. In contrast, Corbyn follows Macdonald in preferring the approach of organic evolution, which is connected to the role of activism. He is not against the Russian revolution, in contrast to Macdonald, but presumably does not aspire for it to be repeated. Corbyn would agree with the Fabians who desire change, but limit it to the role of Parliament. In this manner, he ultimately would act to undermine revolutionary change in the manner of the Fabians. This is why Trotsky maintained: “Overthrowing the Fabians means liberating the revolutionary energy of the British proletariat, winning the British stronghold of reaction for socialism, liberating India and Egypt, and giving a powerful impetus to the movement and development of the peoples of the East.”(7)

However, there is a difference between Corbyn and those reformist currents of the past. In a diluted and vague manner he outlines the promise of socialism. His programme is conceived in terms of the possibilities to create a new society. He does not limit this standpoint to the Parliamentary process but instead implies that popular mass action is necessary in order to influence the development of change. But what does this mean in terms of the application of revolutionary force? Trotsky maintains that the approach of reformists like Lansbury is limited because in the name of pacifist values they reject the utilisation of force. He outlines how a successful general strike is not possible unless it is linked to the development of self-defence and the determination of the working class to carry on the struggle to its necessary end. The logical culmination of the general strike is the coercive attempt to realise a new political power: “Only the highest resoluteness in the revolutionary struggle is capable of striking the arms out of the hands of reaction, shortening the duration of civil war and minimising the number of victims. Whoever does not take this road should not take to arms at all; and without taking to arms a general strike cannot be organized. And if the general strike is rejected there can be no thought of serious struggle.”(8) This comment was written one year before the actual general strike, and it was the determination by its moderate leadership to keep it constitutional and peaceful which led to capitulation and defeat. In contrast, Lansbury is more militant, but Trotsky outlines how his approach represents a strategic dilemma: “He rejects revolutionary force for the seizure of power; that is to say for the complete liberation of the proletariat. But in struggles that do not transcend the bounds of bourgeois society he is perfectly amenable to force and makes use of it.”(9)

This contradictory standpoint could be applied to Corbyn. He is for militant pressure within capitalism in order to realise reforms. But does this perspective also apply to the question of the revolutionary transformation of society? It is unlikely that he accepts this approach because ultimately his stance is connected to the primacy of Parliament. Thus militancy is about activism in terms similar to Lansbury, but a common pacifism means that it is likely that he rejects the role of revolutionary force. This standpoint could include rejecting a general strike in order to improve democracy. But Trotsky considers that the primary strategic problem is that allegiance to pacifism means rejection of the dynamics of the revolutionary transformation of society: “It must be firmly understood: if a truly workers government came to power in Britain even in an ultra-democratic way, civil war would become unavoidable. The workers government would be forced to suppress the resistance of the privileged classes. To do this by means of the old state apparatus, the old police, the old courts, the old army would be impossible. A workers government created by parliamentary means would be forced to construct new revolutionary organs for itself, resting upon the trade unions and working class organisations in general. This would lead to an exceptional growth in the activity and initiative of the working masses. On the basis of a direct struggle against the exploiting classes the trade unions would actively draw closer together not only in their top layers but at the bottom layers as well, and would arrive at the necessity of creating local delegate meetings, councils (Soviets) of workers deputies. A truly Labour government, that is to say, a government dedicated to the end to the interests of the proletariat would find itself in this way compelled to smash the old state apparatus as the instrument of the possessing classes and oppose it with workers councils. That means the democratic origin of the Labour government – even had this proved possible - would lead to the necessity of counter-posing revolutionary class force to the reactionary opposition.”(10)

This comment is an expression of the strategy that divides reformism from the standpoint of revolutionary politics. The ultimate aim of reformism, whether it is of a left-wing variety or more right wing, is to reconcile antagonistic class forces in terms of the methods of compromise and parliamentary legislation. In contrast the revolutionary approach is based on a recognition that the irreconcilable relations between the classes means that the principled party should promote a perspective to bring about the political power of the subordinated class. This means no compromise with the ruling class is possible, and instead the subordinated class should uphold a strategy that brings about the undermining of the existing institutions of power and realises the hegemony of the exploited social forces in the forms of a newly created state based on the institutions of popular democracy. Trotsky supports this standpoint by suggesting that there is no alternative to this revolutionary approach if the working class wants to generate its political power. In contrast, the reformists would oppose this strategy as being anti-democratic, and based on the rejection of the importance of Parliamentary institutions. But Trotsky argues that a genuine workers government committed to socialism could utilise Parliament in order to promote the development of a new commune state and encourage the creation of institutions of popular democracy. It is questionable whether Corbyn supports this perspective. He has the vague aim of socialism, but implies that this is possible via increased state intervention of the existing state and by the role of a Parliamentary majority for the Labour Party. Hence his support for the role of the mobilisation of the working class in order to realise revolutionary aims is ambiguous, and he does not consider that it is necessary to overcome the influence of capital within the economy. This means his view of socialism is based on consent between classes and does not utilise the method of class struggle. In contrast, Trotsky has outlined that the role of class struggle is vital if the process of obtaining political power for the working class and the transition to socialism is to begin.

Corbyn could argue that activism has replaced the importance of Trotsky's approach. The activism of pressure groups combined with the sympathetic role of Parliament could be sufficient in order to bring about transition to socialism. But what Trotsky is emphasising is that only when the working class is consciously committed to realising socialism will it be possible to make advances towards the attainment of this aim. This process relies on a close commitment between the working class and the revolutionary or Communist party. But the Labour party is not revolutionary, and has many leading politicians who are effectively opposed to socialism. Consequently it is questionable whether the Labour Party can become a reliable instrument of socialism, and instead the working class will have to end any ideological dependency on both Conservatism and Labourism if it is to become capable of consciously promoting the prospect of transition to socialism. This means that only when the working class has developed the political attributes to generate the possibility of socialism by its own actions will it be realised. In contrast, the approach of Corbyn is not dependent on this perspective and instead relies on the role of Parliament. So-called socialism will be introduced from above rather than below. This is a standpoint that is opposed to the revolutionary approach that is based on the ability of the subordinated forces within society to be able to act to bring about a process of definite social transformation.

Unfortunately, Trotsky makes an important error in his approach in that he suggests that the act of revolutionary mobilisation of the working class will not be limited by formal democratic principles: “The transition from capitalism to socialism derives not from formal democratic principles elevated above society but from the material conditions of the development of society itself....and from a sharpening of the struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie.....In all our work and all our political decisions the highest criterion is the interests of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat to take power and to re-construct society. We consider that to judge the movement of the proletariat from the standpoint of abstract principles and legal clauses of democracy is reactionary pedantry. We consider the only correct way to judge democracy is from the standpoint of the historical interests of the proletariat.”(11) This view is erroneous because if it could be considered that the revolutionary mass struggle was inherently anti-democratic, but this stance would seriously discredit its objectives and instead imply that the existing political system was superior because it represented a higher level of democracy. Indeed Trotsky does not exclude the importance of existing institutions like Parliament for expressing the democratic aspiration to realise socialism, and this would suggest in a more principled manner that the connection of democracy to the class struggle is an integral part of the revolutionary process. Hence, it is problematical when Trotsky implies that democracy could be a luxury that is not required for the success of the revolutionary process. This view implies that the construction of the socialist society does not require the legitimacy of the role of popular democracy. However, what Trotsky seems to be suggesting is that bourgeois democracy has to be replaced with superior democratic organs of political power. If this is the 'correct' interpretation of his critical comments about democracy we can agree with him.

The point is that whatever type of democratic system is devised in order to represent the political system of socialism, it is necessary to recognise that the system would have a tendency to become bureaucratic and unaccountable if it lacked popular control and the participation of the people in the organisation of society. However, the ability to administer society in a democratic manner starts with the very development of the class struggle. The revolutionary process only has more legitimacy than the role of the bourgeois parliament if it can indicate a higher level of democratic organisation. This possibility should be expressed in the very development of the class struggle in terms of the democratic role of the trade unions and other working class organisations. Only the superior level of democracy in the process of taking political power will imply that the revolution is politically legitimate. This is why Trotsky should not dismiss the importance of democracy and imply that it is not indispensable for the class struggle. On the contrary, the generation of a higher level of democracy is the expression of the very credentials of the revolutionary process. What this means in terms of the future of Parliament may not be established in advance of the success of social transformation. But the traditions of the UK would suggest the continuation of the role of a Parliament. In contrast, Russia was faced with the alternative of the Soviets or the Constituent Assembly. But this alternative should not be forced upon the UK. It may be possible to reconcile Parliament and the Soviets. What is crucial is that the working class establishes the principles of democracy in their organisations of class struggle. Indeed it is questionable that class struggle can occur in any other manner. Thus Trotsky's apparent contrast of democracy with the imperatives of the class struggle is wrong, arbitrary, and ultimately unprincipled. Indeed, the logic of his position would be that the revolution is identical to the leading role of the Party. This position is not intentional, but is the only conclusion that is possible from his standpoint.

Trotsky believes that the MacDonald government can only vacillate and be ineffective in conditions of the intensification of the class struggle: “Between a revolutionary onslaught by the masses and the fierce resistance of the bourgeoisie a MacDonald government would rush about from one side to the other, irritating some, and not satisfying others, provoking the bourgeoisie by its inertia, exacerbating the revolutionary impatience of the workers, kindling a civil war and striving at the same time to deprive it of the necessary leadership on the side of the proletariat. Meanwhile the revolutionary wing would inevitably grow and the most far-sighted resolute and revolutionary elements of the working class would come to the top. On this path a MacDonald government would sooner or later, depending on the balance of forces outside of Parliament, have to surrender its power either to a Conservative government with fascist and not conciliatory tendencies or to a revolutionary government that was really capable of carrying the job to the finish. In both the one and the other event a new explosion of civil war is inevitable, a sharp collision between the classes all along the line.”(12)

Trotsky does exaggerate the prospects about the formation of a revolutionary government, but he is not wrong to predict the intensification of class struggle connected to the limitations of the MacDonald Labour party. The point is will Corbyn have a similar vacillating role? In answering this question it is necessary to indicate that we are not in a similar period of intensified class struggle. Indeed, it can be suggested that class consciousness is very low, and the prospects for the election of a Corbyn administration are very low. Hence if this left wing government was elected it would only encourage the development of class struggle. Only after this initial possibility would we be able to suggest what was the character and intentions of the Corbyn administration. We would not expect it to act in a manner similar to a right-wing MacDonald government. If anything, Corbyn's role would be to promote militant action. But the point is that this administration would still not be able to implement socialism. This prospect can only be realised in terms of whether the dynamics of class struggle achieve revolutionary proportions. In this manner it is questionable whether a still reformist Labour administration can be the instrument of socialism. It could be argued that a left wing Labour government will call upon the working class to engage in militant action in order to defend its measures against Tory opposition, but this defensive action is still inferior to what Trotsky would define as more resolute, effective and revolutionary forms of class struggle: “But in this case is it not simpler to say that revolutionary force is expedient when and where it strengthens the position of the proletariat, weakens or repulses the enemy and accelerates the socialist development of society?”(13)

In other words the process of the transformation of society is likely to be more effective and principled if it is carried out in terms of the influence of a Marxist perspective rather than under the leadership of a Labour government. Only the former approach is likely to be more intransigent and based on a determination to ensure the success of the process of change. But, in contrast, any form of Labour administration is likely to tend towards compromise, and to accept unprincipled agreements rather than encourage the dynamic logic of the class struggle. This is why the working class must become influenced by the perspective that only the intensification of the social conflict will bring about victory. This standpoint is likely to be rejected by the Labour government, and they will only utilise working class mobilisation in terms of bringing about agreement within Parliament. Unfortunately Trotsky makes these types of valid conclusions about the vacillating character of Labour governments, but he also suggests that peaceful change to socialism is not possible: “Parliament cannot in the slightest degree guarantee a peaceful transition: revolutionary class force is indispensable and unavoidable. This must be prepared for and trained for. The masses must be educated and tempered in a revolutionary way. The first condition for this is intransigent struggle against the corrupting spirit of MacDonaldism.”(14)

The essence of revolutionary change is not the application of violent methods. Instead the aim should be to realise the process of social transformation in terms of the combination of determination and non-violent methods. The application of violence in the revolutionary process is likely to result in civil war in the period of the aftermath of political change, and this situation will represent upheaval and an inability to promote transition to socialism. Instead what is being aimed for is the attempt to realise the connection between democracy, peaceful methods of struggle, and the aims of revolutionary transformation of society. In this manner a high level of consent for the process of change can be realised. In contrast, the application of violence generates antagonism and intransigence and means the success of the revolution is not accepted by large parts of society. This is why the commitment to peaceful change can bring about the acceptance by society of the aims of the revolution. This commitment to peaceful change does not mean the dilution of aims, but instead expresses the most effective manner in which they can be realised. In other words there is a difference between the application of revolutionary force and violence. The former represents the determination of the working class influenced by a Marxist party in trying to bring about socialism by means of the role of class struggle, whilst the latter refers to the role of physical coercion and the implementation of political ends by the utilisation of the role of armed forces. Often force and violence is conflated, and this is indeed the mistake of Trotsky. But we would argue that whilst revolutionary force is indispensable for the task of bring about the success of the attempt to introduce socialism, it is possible to achieve these ends without the application of violence. However, it is possible that despite the intentions of the revolutionary government violence will be utilised by the counter-revolutionary forces. In this sense the threat of violent overthrow will be opposed by the defensive and limited role of the action of the armed forces of the revolutionary regime. But it is to be hoped that this application of coercive methods will be of a limited and short duration. We know from the experience of Stalinism that the constant resort to terror and repression was an expression of the degeneration of the regime. This is why it is to be hoped that the process of transition to socialism can be peaceful. This prospect indicates that socialism can be realised without upheaval and in conditions of political tranquillity.

Trotsky suggests in a tentative manner that the trade unions liberated from the limitations of its bureaucratic functionaries may become the support of an equally transformed Labour party in the struggle for socialism: “The reformist, opportunist liberal Labour Party can only weaken the trade unions by paralysing the initiative of the masses. A revolutionary Labour Party resting upon the trade unions will become in turn a powerful instrument for their recovery and resurgence.”(15) This is the crucial point of the present moment in time. Can the fact of the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party inspire a transformation of the trade unions so that they become instruments of the realisation of socialism? The answer to this question is presently uncertain. Corbyn is supported by the very trade union bureaucrats who intend to maintain their organisations as limited defensive organisations of the working class within the capitalist system. In these circumstances it is problematical whether the Corbyn leadership would support an attempt by the rank and file to establish democratic hegemony over the unions. Consequently Corbyn does not challenge the existing passive role of the unions and the fact that they are reluctant to challenge the policies of the Tory government. In these circumstances there would seem to be no alternative to the development of a mass Marxist organisation if the process of the transformation of the unions is to be encouraged and promoted. This is because there is still an organic relationship between the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Party leadership. In this context Trotsky's following comment is possibly optimistic: “The British bourgeoisie takes unerring stock of the fact that the chief danger threatens it from the quarter of the trade unions and that only under the pressure from these organisations can the Labour party, having replaced its leadership, turn itself into a revolutionary force.”(16)

Trotsky's view is logical in that it implies that the transformed trade unions can exert their social weight in order to bring about a revolutionary leadership of the Labour Party. However, we presently have a left-wing leader and yet there is no sign of the democratic development of the trade unions. Instead they act as an important conservative force upon the new leader of the Labour Party. Furthermore, it is questionable whether Corbyn wants to change this situation. He may secretly prefer a situation in which the unions act as a bulwark obstructing the possibility of radical change within society. This is why the only guarantee that the unions and Labour party could become an impetus for revolutionary change is to build a mass popular revolutionary party. The role of this party would be to promote the democratic transformation of unions and Labour Party, and so ensure that they developed in a principled manner in favour of the attempt to realise genuine socialism. In the present circumstances, Trotsky's approach – that the trade unions can bring about the revolutionary development of the Labour Party – is both correct and incorrect. It is true that the trade unions could bring about the process of principled change within the Labour party, but they presently act as a conservative force because of the domination of the bureaucratic leadership. Only the building of a mass Marxist party can act to resolve this impasse.

However in one instance the situation in the present has a more favourable aspect than in the past. The domination of the MacDonald type leadership of the Labour party has been replaced with the election of a left-wing leader. This means the programme of the leader is not one of conciliation of the Conservatives and the British establishment but is instead about promising radical change. Consequently the major problem is presently not that of the Labour party but is instead about the low level of class consciousness within the working class. Trotsky could be optimistic about the political situation because he was writing about a radicalised and militant working class that was impatient with its cautious leadership within the Labour Party and trade unions. Hence he could write about the increasing revolutionary tempo of events and predict with some validity that the Communist Party could grow in these circumstances if it is principled and critical of the class collaboration of the existing leadership of the working class: “The Communist Party can prepare itself for the leading role only by a ruthless criticism of all the leading staff of the British Labour movement and only by a day-to-day exposure of its conservative, anti-proletarian, imperialist, monarchist and lackeyish role in all spheres of the social life and the class movement.”(17) This perspective was brilliantly confirmed with the development of the general strike and the betrayal of its potential by the trade union bureaucracy. The working class was ready for a decisive confrontation with the forces of capital, but was betrayed by its leadership.

In contrast the contemporary working class is characterised by an in-built conservatism and deeply held nationalist views. Furthermore, the class is split between its unorganised and more organised sections. In this sense Trotsky's work is not relevant for the present. We are not in a situation of constant radicalisation of the working class – quite the opposite. Instead we have to consider how to re-build the very traditions of struggle, militancy and opposition within the working class. Marxists have to try and tackle defeatist and passive sentiments, and oppose the general situation of demoralisation. Thus what is called for is a process of the re-discovery of what is meant by the term working class in its most subversive and independent sense. However, this task also calls for the renewal of Marxism. The present situation of despondency has led to the creation of Marxist organisations which are more orientated to the politics of protest than the promotion of a revolutionary perspective. They have to become more ambitious and overcome the effective pessimism that resides within their ranks. Trotsky could write about how the time has matured for the leadership of the working class by the Communist party. We are a long way from this situation in the present. Instead Marxism has to carry out a protracted process of ideological and cultural struggle in order to obtain mass support for the Communist banner. This development means that the various Marxist organisations have to overcome their present pessimistic views of the working class as a reactionary mass. Instead we need to be influenced by the optimism of Trotsky.

|However despite this important problem we can hope, and work to realise how a left wing led Labour Party can promote the cause of social change within the UK. In contrast, at the time that Trotsky wrote his book on the UK, the conservative nature of the Labour leadership was the major problem undermining the development of a revolutionary process of transformation. Hence the problems are different if we compare the situation at the time of Trotsky's book with that of the present. He was outlining the limitations of the leadership of the Labour Party and how this could undermine the advance of the class struggle. In contrast, the major problem of today concerns the low level of class consciousness of the working class. But in a sense the answer to these problems is the same: what is called for is to develop a mass Marxist party. In the 1920's this could have acted to replace the timid and conservative character of the Labour Party, and provided superior leadership than the centrist Independent Labour Party. However, in the present the development of the Marxist party would have the central task of acting to promote revolutionary consciousness within the working class. This process would go alongside the aim of obtaining an electoral victory for the new left wing led Labour Party. If this task was successful it would be an immense achievement because there has never been a Labour government that has been more radical than the possible Corbyn administration.

What is in common with the past period that Trotsky is writing about is the aspect of the decline of British capitalism. However, this situation has had different outcomes. In the past this aspect led to the radicalisation of the working class and resistance to the cutting of wages by the employers. The decline of capitalism led to the united resistance of the working class against the employers’ offensive. But in the present the decline of capitalism, partly because of the limitations of the trade unions, has not led to the common defence of the conditions of the working class. Instead there has been public expenditure cuts and increased unemployment. The result has been demoralisation and the development of nationalist influences. In this context the worst position situation would be for a Corbyn government to be elected on the basis of passive support, and the continued undermining of class solidarity because of nationalist discontents. Instead we need to connect the aim of electing a Corbyn administration with the revival of the collectivism and strength of the working class. This task has to be accompanied with the transformation of the trade unions. Indeed if this revival of the working class movement is not realised, it would be difficult to envisage the election of the Corbyn government.

In relation to this issue of promoting the class struggle, Trotsky was aware that reformism was not sufficient. This is why we cannot depend on the initiative of any Corbyn administration. Instead we have to support Trotsky's contention that only revolutionary leadership is adequate for the tasks of the class struggle. Hence the crucial question becomes what type of Communist/Marxist party are we trying to create? If it is principled and independently minded, it will not be reluctant to criticise any limitations of a Corbyn administration. But if it becomes centrist it will adapt to the Labour government in the manner of the Independent Labour Party of the past.(18) Thus the Communist party must be a critical supporter of the Corbyn administration, but it also must not be afraid to challenge its legitimacy if proves wanting and adapts to the power of capital.

Hence the continued relevance of Trotsky's work on Britain was that he was prepared to ruthlessly criticise all trends within the Labour movement from the standpoint of the interests of the proletarian revolution. It is by adhering to this task of ideological struggle that represents the only principled basis to build a revolutionary party in the present. However, the Marxist groups are not yet adequate for this task. This is why one of our principled aims in the near future is the creation of a united Marxist party that is based on assimilation of the lessons that Trotsky outlined for the class struggle in the UK. He was meticulous in outlining the illusions of the forces of reformism and centrism from the standpoint of the aim of the attainment of socialism. If we are to be equal to this task we should not be afraid to criticise any trend within the existing Labour Movement. Only in this principled manner can a revolutionary party be built. In this context Trotsky's work on Britain is still relevant for us today.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) Leon Trotsky: Where is Britain Going, in Trotsky's Writings on Britain volume 2, New Park London 1974 pp5-123

(2) ibid p16

(3)Michael Roberts: The Long Depression, Haymarket books, Chicago 2016

(4)Trotsky op cit p30

(5)Istvan Meszaros: The Power of Ideology, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Sussex 1989 p373

(6)Trotsky op cit p47

(7) ibid p57-58

(8) ibid p64

(9) ibid p65

(10) ibid p68-69

(11) ibid p70-71

(12) ibid p78

(13) ibid p79

(14) ibid p81

(15) ibid p104

(16) ibid p105

(17) ibid p119

(18) ibid p119-120