The History of the Class Struggle, 1914-2014 by Phil Sharpe

1914-1945

The age of innocence of the Second International ended in 1914. Until the beginning of the First World War the parties claiming to be socialist had been able to reconcile the struggle for reforms with the longer term objective of socialism. However the collective response to the development of world war was that the interests of nation could supersede the standpoint of international class solidarity. This stance was not entirely surprising because it was connected to the failure to develop an imaginative strategy for opposing the development of world war. The Second International substituted denunciations of the forthcoming war in Europe instead of the importance of concentrating on how they would actually undermine the development of global conflict. In this situation the working class in Europe believed it had no option than to support the claims of national defence. Most of the parties of the Second International led the working class into the carnage of modern warfare. This situation meant the parties of the Second International were committed to defence of the existing nation state as an important aim and if necessary the competing claims of socialism would be sacrificed in order to uphold the national interest. These parties could no longer be reliable agencies of the interests of socialism.(1) This situation also meant that an antagonistic contradiction would develop between these national opportunist parties and the aspirations of an increasing radicalised working class. The growing opposition of the international working class to the world war meant that these traditional parties no longer adequately expressed the discontent of the working class in relation to the demands of war and the erosion of material standards of living.

But one party did emerge that was able to articulate and support the opposition to world war. This was the Bolshevik faction led by Lenin in Russia. It was for the most extreme opposition to war and developed an effective strategy for the working class to realise political power in the period of the revolutionary upheaval of 1917. The strategy was represented by the slogan: “All Power to the Soviets”, which upheld the view that with revolutionary leadership the Soviets, as democratic organs of the popular will, would be able to replace the fragile domination of the bourgeois Provisional government. The October revolution of 1917 was an authentic proletarian revolution because the aims of the revolutionary party and the working class were similar and based on the view that the overthrow of the Provisional government would satisfy the aspirations for peace, bread and the improvement of the situation of workers and peasants.(2) However the important role of the Soviets as the democratic administration of society was never effectively realised and the organisation of the state was based on the domination of the monolithic party. Furthermore, the process of nationalisation of the economy was not accompanied by the consolidation of workers control of production and the significance of the factory committees was also based on the importance of the party. In other words at the level of politics and economics the state and society that was established was never a genuine workers state and instead was effectively deformed by these bureaucratic distortions. The ideology of the leadership of the Party was based on these developments and the conception of socialism that was defended in the ‘ABC of Communism’ was statist and based on rigid centralisation of the economy. But these distortions did not mean the party was unable to represent the interests of the working class. The question of the development of international revolution was crucial if these contradictions could be resolved and an authentic socialist society created.

The unrest of the international working class in the period 1918-1920 indicated the possibilities for the overthrow of capitalism in Europe. In Germany the working class was often in open rebellion against the leadership of the Social Democrats, and the result was the formation of the Independent Social Democratic organisation. The Russian Communist Party acted to establish the Communist International in 1919 but its rigid organisational centralisation meant it alienated the prospect of support from radicalised Social Democracy in Germany and Italy. The inauguration of rigid principles for membership of the Comintern meant that the left-wing of Social Democracy tended to reject a form of unification that would mean the surrender of any semblance of independence, and as a result the Communist International because an organisation that upheld the supremacy of the Soviet party. The Rapallo Treaty between the Soviet state and Germany in the early 1920’s indicated the beginning of a contradiction between the diplomatic interests of the isolated Soviet state and the aim of world revolution. However the major problem in this period was that the Soviet state misjudged the possibilities for revolution in Germany and so ignored the unrest created by the French occupation of the Ruhr. Consequently the Communist International promoted revolution in periods of the ebb of the class struggle. These developments indicated that contradictions could develop between the perspectives of the party and the process of radicalisation of the working class. The result was the debacle of the attempt at a party led revolution in Germany in 1923. The Fifth Congress of the Comintern argued that the international working class had not been defeated despite the empirical fact of the stabilisation of capitalism based on American domination of Europe and the consolidation of the influence of Social Democracy. Hence the Comintern promoted revolutionary adventurism and ignored the importance of the united front with left-wing forces within Social Democracy.

The British general strike indicated the uneven character of the relative stabilisation of capitalism. Immense popularity of the general strike in favour of the miners indicated the possibility to transform the general strike into a conscious struggle for the overthrow of the British state. But the trade union bureaucracy, including its left-wing elements, preferred capitulation to the government as the only alternative to the development of struggle which would transcend constitutional limitations. Social Democracy and the trade union leaders indicated that they would uphold the so-called national interest against the prospect of the intensification of class struggle and the development of revolutionary change. The result of this opportunism was a massive defeat for the miners and the British working class, but despite the criticism of the Communist International and the Soviet state the Soviet trade unions did not split from the Anglo-Russian trade union Committee. This development was one of the most important examples that the Soviet party leadership preferred the role of diplomacy in contrast to the promotion of the requirements of the international class struggle. The Soviet party argued that the necessity of links with the British trade unions was important in order to oppose the prospects of imperialist war against the Soviet Union and so the continuation of the Anglo Russian trade union committee took precedence over the prospect of a split with the traitors who ended the 1926 general strike. This standpoint also indicated that the perspective of socialism in one country of the newly dominant leadership of Stalin was effectively undermining principled support for the international class struggle. The tragic events in China caused by the opportunist support of the Soviet party for the Kuomintang was another important example of this reactionary perspective.

However Trotsky did not have a principled political alternative to the increasing opportunist limitations of the Soviet Communist party and Comintern despite his powerful criticisms.(3) For example when the Comintern Congress at the Sixth Congress of 1928 adopted a new programme he was unable to advocate a programmatic alternative. This meant he was unable to construct an alternative conception of what is meant by socialism within the USSR, and he failed to conceive a strategic alternative to the opportunist view that the USSR was the base of world revolution. Instead he seemed to imply that under his leadership the opportunist limitations of the Soviet state would be resolved. This idealist standpoint ignored the fact that the primary political problem was the isolation of the Soviet Union and its domination by the imperatives of the world economy. This meant that distortions occurred at the level of policy because of the effective elaboration of the Soviet national interest as the dominant basis of the views of the Communist International. In the short-term Bordiga was right to suggest that this problem could be tackled by the generation of the accountability of the Soviet party to the Communist International. However, this solution was complicated by the fact that Bolshevisation of the parties of the Comintern meant that these parties were increasingly led by puppets of the Soviet Union and not by independent thinkers. Hence what would really generate the prospect of the transformation of this tendency towards the justification of Soviet diplomacy would be reconciliation with the forces of the left-wing Social Democrats and the Council Communists. The creation of effective political unity with these forces would generate the possibility for the creation of a genuine Third International that was not subservient to the Soviet state. This would also mean that the voice in favour of popular democracy and workers control would become more influential. The distorted and elitist Soviet view of socialism would be challenged.

Instead of these constructive developments Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Union and the Communist International adopted the crude economic catastrophist view that the advent of crisis in 1929 meant the period of relative stabilisation of capitalism was ending and would be replaced by revolutionary situations. Increasingly this meant that attempts to realise reconciliation with even left-wing forms of Social Democracy was rejected. But the Soviet Party and Comintern did not seem to accept that crisis would radicalise sections of Social Democracy who would reject accommodation with capital and instead this trend was criticised in crude terms as expressing Social Fascism. However this verbal radicalism did not result in the promotion of active forms of the class struggle, and instead radicalism at the level of propaganda was combined with passivity in terms of the strategy and tactics of the class struggle.(4) The working class in Germany and elsewhere was not encouraged to engage in militant actions that would facilitate the prospect of revolution. Instead the result was a strategic impasse that encouraged the working class to wait until a favourable situation emerged with revolutionary possibilities. The result of this strategic passivity was rejection of support for united front action with Social Democracy against Fascism. Hence the very conception of defensive struggle against fascism was castigated as being modest and not compatible with the radical implications of economic crisis, and this attitude encouraged the most complacent perspective about the prospect of the Nazi ascent to power. The result was the ascendency of Fascism to power without resistance. Also Social Democracy did not oppose the Fascist domination of the German Reichstag because it did not support extra-constitutional action and instead preferred to accommodate to the new situation. In contrast the German Communist party engaged in radical boasting about the revolutionary overthrow of the Nazi state. It is important to recognise that neither the forces of Social Democracy or the German Communists actually listened to their working class supporters who were willing to engage in militant actions against the Nazi’s. The failings of the so-called parties of the working class had led to the triumph of German fascism.

The situation was dire. As a result of opportunism and dogma both the Second International and the Third International was unable to advocate a strategy for resistance to the ascendency of the Nazi’s in Germany. Many Marxists, like the supporters of the Frankfurt School, concluded that this meant the demise of the validity of the view that the working class had a revolutionary role in history. This standpoint is completely dogmatic because what had actually been empirically expressed were the limitations of the political representatives of the Second International and Third International. If the working class was to be able to articulate and express its interests in effective struggle against Fascism and in favour of socialism it would have to reject the organisational and political limitations of the parties that claimed to act in its interest. This is what started to happen. The working class of Vienna spontaneously generated an insurrection against the effective expression of Fascism in Austria. Despite the vacillations of the Social Democratic organisation, the military wing of this party acted on its own initiative in order to promote a military rising against Fascism. Despite defeat this uprising inspired the workers of Europe to support a more militant stance in response to the counterrevolutionary threat of Fascism. In France the threat of a Fascist coup, a result of a militant right-wing demonstration, led to the working class engaging in spontaneous action. Enormous mass pressure led to the formation of a united front of the Socialist and Communist Parties. However the Soviet Union acted to transform the momentum towards the development of anti-Fascist activity within the international working class into becoming an expression of its diplomatic objectives. Stalin wanted to construct a broad political alliance against the threats from the Fascist states, and in this context the Franco-Soviet pact was signed in 1935. The spontaneous working class strategy of uniting the struggle against Fascism with the struggle for socialism was undermined by this diplomatic attempt to realise a broad alliance between democratic imperialism and the USSR.

The Popular Front strategy adopted by the Comintern at its seventh Congress in 1935 meant the defence of the bourgeois nation state became an official part of the policy of the international Communist movement. The question of struggle for socialism was subordinated to the task of the immediate defeat of Fascism. This was a response to the militant united front approach of the radicalised working class that recognised the issue of defensive tasks was connected to the prospect of the overthrow of capitalism. The authority of the Comintern was utilised in order to reject this spontaneous perspective and instead the justification of political reconciliation with Social Democracy was upheld in 1935. The only difference between Social Democracy and Stalinism was about the legitimacy of the Russian revolution and the construction of the Soviet state without organs of genuine democracy. In other words both Social Democracy and Stalinism became officially against any working class activity that could pose the possibility of the overthrow of capitalism. This meant on the one hand Social Democracy supported the role of bourgeois democracy against the prospect of the extra-Parliamentary actions of workers, whilst Stalinism implied that the interests of the Soviet Union meant proletarian revolution was no longer an immediate perspective. Consequently in the mid 1930’s only the spontaneous actions of the working class upheld the historic interests of this class in terms of the motivation to relate the defence of democracy to the struggle for socialism.

The events in Spain in 1936 represented the effective articulation of the aspirations of the spontaneous working class. Despite the limitations of Socialists, Stalinists, and Anarchists the working class and peasants responded to the threat of Fascism by the organisation of action that led to the occupation of factories and agricultural land. The various democratic political parties acted to undermine the significance of this mass activity and promoted the view that the opposition to Fascism should not be on the basis of the development of social revolution. The Communist Party was the most energetic supporters of this view and they suppressed any mass expression of the aspiration for proletarian revolution. In other words the strategy of party revolution, in terms of the domination of the state by a single party, became consciously opposed to the spontaneous and diverse alternative of democratic proletarian revolution. The prospect of proletarian revolution in Spain would have required the effective unity of the POUM, Anarchists and Socialists, in conjunction with the importance of mass pressure, and this united alliance would have been able to defeat the counterrevolutionary actions of the Stalinists and the threat of the Fascists. The necessity of effective military organisation would not have been in contradiction with the aspirations for the revolutionary transformation of society.

The formation of the Popular Front government in France led to an upsurge in militant activity of the working class in the form of the occupation of the factories. However the Communist Party did not advocate the development of this activity in the form of the connection between the occupations and workers control of the factories. Instead it proposed wage increases and a shorter working week in order to end the mass struggle. The Communist party was acting in a reformist manner and so was hostile to the revolutionary implications of any mass struggle. In other words the events of the 1930’s indicated that the so-called parties of the working class were opposed to any mass action that expressed the possibility for advance towards the realisation of proletarian revolution. In a situation in which the working class was radicalised by the crisis and the importance of the struggle against Fascism it seemed that the prospect was favourable to the creation of a new political force that would be able to articulate the militancy of the working class. The political ferment of the 1930’s was expressed by the development of the Trotskyist International Left Opposition and the emergence of organisations influenced by Brandler, Bukharin and Lovestone, and the various Council Communist currents. Furthermore, the forces of radicalised left-wing Social Democracy like the Independent Labour Party were also receptive to the possibility of the formation of a new international. Unfortunately the various attempts to bring about unity failed and instead the forces of the potential revolutionary opposition to Stalinism and Social Democracy was fragmented and remained isolated from the international working class. This meant the radicalised actions of the working class occurred without any relation to the role of the revolutionary party, except for the importance of the POUM in Spain.

The Transitional Programme of what became the Fourth International led by Trotsky was based on the assimilation of some of the most important lessons of the class struggle occurring in the period 1917-1938.(5) It recognised that the economic and political situation was favourable for the militant actions of the working class to acquire revolutionary dimensions if the mass struggle became influenced by the role of the revolutionary party. In this context the programme outlined a collection of transitional demands that would connect the aims of immediate struggle with the objective of the revolutionary transformation of society. The importance of occupations, workers control of production and factory committees, was outlined in this manner. However the programme was deficient in the sense that it neglected detailed discussion of the most important defensive tasks of the present which was the significance of the struggle against Fascism. This neglect was connected to the lack of analysis of the role of the united front and the glossing over of the importance of winning the workers who supported Stalinism and Social Democracy to the banner of the Fourth International. Instead what was being outlined was a schema about the character of the revolutionary process which was conceived in terms of developing increasing support for transitional demands. Issues such as the defence of democracy against Fascism and detailed discussion of the attitude that revolutionaries should take in relation to the forthcoming world war was effectively glossed over. Instead the situation was presented as a possible repetition of developments that had occurred between 1914-17, and the actual crucial task of defeating fascism in war was reduced to an aspect of revolutionary defeatism. Instead of this theoretical complacency it was necessary to outline how the forthcoming war would be different to the last world war in terms of the necessity to mobilise the international working class against the reactionary threat of Fascism. In this context tactics would have to be modified in order to uphold the political independence of the working class in relation to the reactionary demands of the nation state whilst also defending the interests of democracy against the counterrevolutionary threat of Fascism.

The realisation of the Nazi-Soviet Pact indicated the urgency of the necessity to develop an international strategy of working class opposition to fascism. The capitulation of the Soviet bureaucracy to the economic and military power of the Nazi regime meant the so-called bulwark against fascism had actually accommodated to the interests of Fascism. Furthermore in the period 1939-40 many of the bourgeois regimes in Europe were unable to carry out effective military defence against the expansion of Fascism. The formation of the Vichy regime in France indicated that the only opposition to fascism was with the international working class which would have to utilise its social power in order to undermine the expansion of the counterrevolutionary threat. The task was to develop a strategy of working class resistance to fascism. This meant promoting guerrilla struggles combined with the role of the industrial power of the working class. It also meant the development of a revolutionary struggle in Britain to overthrow the Chamberlin government and replace it with a workers government. In contrast to this possibility the Soviet bureaucracy was adjusting its diplomatic actions to the acceptance of the military power of Fascism. The strict revolutionary defeatism of the Trotskyists meant they could not respond flexibly to rapidly changing events.

The formation of the Churchill government meant the working class should have articulated an independent strategy of how to struggle against fascism that was different to the military objectives of British imperialism. Instead some of the Trotskyists outlined the Proletarian military policy that failed to elaborate in detailed a systematic conception of the tasks of principled anti-fascist struggle. The central task was to combine critical support for the war against fascism with rejection of the ideological influence of bourgeois nationalism. It could have been possible to combine opposition to the ideology of national defence with support for the internationalist ideology of anti-fascism. Furthermore the ultimate objective of the success of anti-fascist strategy would still have been the goal of proletarian revolution. Instead of this credible strategy the Trotskyists defended in an unconvincing manner the approach of revolutionary defeatism. Ultimately they became supporters of the Soviet military campaign whilst having little of significance to suggest in relation to the development of the activity of the international working class.

The failure of the many revolutionary groups to elaborate and articulate a strategy of opposition to fascism meant the major bourgeois democratic power of the USA and UK, and the Soviet Union after 1941, expressed in a reactionary form the standpoint of anti-fascism. In other words the aim of anti-fascism was carried out in terms of the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy and British and American Imperialism. The success of these allied powers ideologically undermined the credibility of proletarian revolution because it seemed that Fascism could be defeated by the actions of existing nation states rather than by the militant role of the working class. The role of the working class seemed to have been reduced to that of supporter of the Allied war effort. However, the actual importance of the international working class was indicated by the fact that the narrow interests of the Three Allied powers could not realise a democratic Europe based on equality and prosperity. Instead the outcome of the role of the Allied powers was the division of Europe and the onset of Cold war. In contrast a credible anti-fascist strategy of the working class could have resulted in a socialist Europe. Consequently, the strategy of anti-fascism did not imply uncritical support of the Allied Powers and instead implied an independent programme that would include demands for the democratisation of the societies waging war with Fascism and liberation of the colonies. This would mean that the very success of a principled programme of anti-Fascism would raise the issue of the generation of socialism as its overall objective. In contrast the programmatic purity of the Trotskyists meant they were unable to effectively intervene in the class struggle, and revolutionary defeatism proved to be an inadequate strategy for promoting the political independence of the working class and it failed to generate the development of class struggle. In contrast the renewed anti-Fascism of the Stalinist forces enabled them to become influential and popular in Yugoslavia, France, Italy and Greece. However they used this popularity, except for Yugoslavia, in order to accommodate to the restoration of bourgeois democracy.

The Soviet Union between 1918-28 was effectively a deformed workers state. This was because despite bureaucratic distortions and the inequality produced by a monolithic party state it was still accountable in important senses to the aspirations of the working class and the peasantry. Hence the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921 meant the economy aimed to increase the level of consumption of the working class and to realise the aims of the peasants to generate the benefits of the process of land re-distribution of 1918. Furthermore, the programme of the Left Opposition articulated the objectives of a principled political vanguard, whilst Bukharin was the most intellectual and erudite spokesperson of the deformed workers state. In 1928 this situation began to change when Stalin began to advocate collectivisation and this ultimately resulted in the genocide of the peasantry and the implementation of a type of modern serfdom. This development was in order to support industrialisation and the introduction of five year plans. The aim was to create a modern economy that could sustain an extensive programme of military defence. However, this also meant the state was no longer receptive to the aims of the workers and peasants and instead it became the instrument of the rule of a new bureaucracy that has been explained as the development of the rule of a new bureaucratic class or state capitalism. Therefore the state was dedicated to the process of the primitive accumulation of the means of production and was based on the despotic rule of Stalin. A small layer of skilled workers could benefit from this situation by the prospect of social mobility and becoming the social forces of this new ruling class.

Trotsky could not explain how this new state could be a workers state despite the complete lack of accountability of this state to the working class. He actually accepted that nationalised property could express a process of exploitation of labour, and so his work ‘Revolution Betrayed’ is unconvincing when trying to equate nationalisation with the role of a workers state.(6) The Soviet state reflected its increasingly reactionary character by the explicit rejection of the aim of world socialist revolution in the 1930’s and instead its objective became the expansion of the strength of the Soviet Union. This meant the programme adopted at the sixth Comintern Congress was effectively rejected in the mid 1930’s, and the role of the Comintern was reduced to being the justification of the foreign policy of the USSR. The Soviet Union was not a principled opponent of Fascism, and if Hitler had not invaded the USSR Stalin may have deepened his alliance with the Nazi regime. In other words there was nothing progressive about the USSR by the 1930’s and instead nationalisation was utilised to intensify the exploitation of the workers and peasants. Trotsky’s insistence on the USSR being a workers state undermined the prospect of the development of unity between the various revolutionary forces. He should have accepted the view that the Nazi-Soviet Pact meant the reactionary character of the bureaucracy justified policies that had little connection with the role of a workers state. Implicitly he accepted the view that the USSR represented the domination of a new class, but his formal definition and crude labelling meant he could not accept the logic of his own arguments and conclusions.(7)

THE COLD WAR

The original aim of the Allied Powers devised during the Second World War was to make an agreement in order to realise an agreed process of domination and control of the post-war world. However, this prospect was not realised because the security concerns of the Soviet Union ultimately conflicted with the aspiration of the USA to have effective access to all global markets. Furthermore, tensions began to develop in 1945 when the actions of the Soviet Union ensured that the government of Poland would not be democratic. However, it was possibly the introduction of Marshall Aid by the USA that ultimately led to the cold war because this programme indicated that America wanted to economically dominate all of Europe and the Soviet Union responded by intensifying its colonial control of Eastern Europe. The introduction of Marshall Aid led to an effective alliance between Social Democracy and America because this economic programme enhanced the ability to develop welfare states, or a process of economic and political compromise between the forces of capital and labour. This situation also meant the militancy of the working class was undermined for a period and replaced by critical support of the welfare state. In the UK the ideology of building a new society based on the introduction of reforms led to a period of de-radicalisation of the working class. It was also understood that the societies of Eastern Europe and the USSR had widespread poverty and so the appeal of ‘existing socialism’ diminished because of the economic successes of capitalism under the hegemony of America. It was also recognised that the threat of world war was because of the rivalry between the USA and the USSR rather than inter-imperialist tensions and so the working class tended to become increasingly anti-Soviet and supportive of the national interest. Hence popular support for the programme of Social Democracy combined with adherence to the USA in relation to its rivalry with the USSR undermined the connection of militancy with the class interest of the working class.

The Fourth International under the leadership of Pablo did not understand the balance of class forces generated by the Cold War. Instead of acknowledging the reasons for the hegemony of the USA in this period they instead supported a voluntarist conception of war revolution.(8) They believed that events like the Korean War would promote a process of distorted revolutions occurring under the leadership of Stalinism. Hence the forces of Pablo critically supported the USSR in the cold war, and the theory that the USSR was a workers state was utilised in order to project onto Stalinism progressive features such as being the expression of an objective historical process. The leadership of the Fourth International outlined why Stalinism had become an effective substitute for the role of the working class. If this approach was to be rejected it would mean rejecting the Pabloite conception of the cold war and instead articulating the importance of the working class for the process of the accumulation of capital and economic recovery. But the relative peace in the class struggle in the 1950’s encouraged the development of the perspective of Third World revolution and acceptance of a progressive role for Stalinism. However events in 1953 and 1956 undermined the validity of the Pabloite conception of international relations. In 1953 the workers of East Berlin went on strike for better conditions, and in 1956 Khruschev’s secret speech admitted to the despotic character of the rule of Stalin. This resulted in unrest in Eastern Europe and the uprising in Hungary was led by the workers class who formed councils or replica Soviets. Mass unrest indicated that Stalinism was a repressive regime that lacked popular support and so was not an expression of authentic socialism. Furthermore the international aims of the USSR were defensive and based on the strategy of peaceful co-existence rather than promotion of world revolution. All these developments undermined the Pabloite conception of the world situation, and Pablo’s influence was replaced by that of Mandel who became the more orthodox leader of the Fourth International.

An important problem with the orthodoxy of the Fourth International was that they could not explain the reactionary character of the expansion of the Soviet Union into Eastern Europe. Instead they utilised the conception of the degenerated workers state in order to justify a progressive view that the influence of the Soviet Union had led to the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism in Eastern Europe and resulted in the formation of deformed workers states. This means the Fourth International provided critical support for these states and so the opposition to Stalinism was compromised. In other words they defended the supposed historically advanced character of these states and suggested that they represented some form of socialism. Hence the actual character of these states as colonies of the USSR was obscured, and the historically anachronistic aspect of their standpoint was denied and instead the view that a socialist bloc had been formed was accommodated. The important point is that the fact that some social advances could be made because of nationalisation and planning did not mean that this expressed some form of socialism. Instead what characterised the economic and political relations between the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was the extraction of economic resources by the former from the latter, and the related creation of a collection of buffer states that guaranteed military security for the USSR. The only principled strategy was for revolution in Eastern Europe in order to end the domination of the USSR. Events in Hungary had indicated that the working class would have a crucial role in realising this perspective. Actual historical progress was not represented by the illusion that deformed workers states had been formed, and instead emancipation could only be expressed by the development of class struggle against the bureaucratic domination of Stalinism.

In the West many books had been written about the demise of the revolutionary role of the working class because of the possibility of affluence under capitalism. It was suggested by Herbert Marcuse that alienation itself could be transcended by the compensatory character of higher wages.(9) What these comfortable critics of the Marxist view of the working class failed to recognise was that not only were the reasons for this affluence generated by the cold war period but also this affluence did not overcome the actual continuation of the tensions generated by exploitation. Furthermore it was not understood that affluence could actually represent the gains of the collective strength of the working class. The level of trade union membership of the working class was high in the 1950’s and 1960’s and its ability to defend the gains of this cold war period had not yet been tested. In addition books were also written that called for alliances between the industrial working class and the newly emerging white collar strata.(10) This standpoint could represent the promise of an effective strategy of struggle in the future. The pessimism or elitism of these views about the working class was seriously challenged by the development of the French general strike in 1968. This event began as a student struggle and became extended with the occupation of the factories by the working class. These developments indicated that the aspiration for a better society had not been undermined by the affluence of the recent period and it was primarily the action of the Stalinist led trade unions that resulted in an agreement for higher wages which meant the struggle for power did not occur. However the example of the French general strike inspired militant actions in Italy and the UK, and led to a European escalation of strikes. This situation was also influenced by the anti-war agitation concerning Vietnam. Mandel was able to write a book about political economy that explained that inflation and the threat of recession was inspiring the recent struggles.(10)

In other words the mass struggles of the working class in the late 1960’s and 1970’s had undermined the scepticism about the revolutionary possibilities of the social role of the working class. These events were personified by the Portuguese revolution of 1974, in which the activity of the working class brought an end to the military dictatorship and posed the very issue of working class political power. It was the actions of the Socialist Party and the limitations of the Stalinists that ensured these developments did not occur. But a Portuguese proletarian revolution could have transformed the situation. Similar points could be made about developments in Bolivia in 1971 and Chile before the military coup. It was the very threat of popular power in Chile that led to the repression of the military coup. In the UK the militancy of the working class culminated in the ‘Winter of Discontent’, so-called because the struggles of low-paid workers undermined the very domination of the Labour government and raised the issue of alternatives to the domination of Parliamentary government.

THE OFFENSIVE OF CAPITAL

In the late 1970’s important bourgeois politicians like Thatcher argued that in order to revive the strength of the capitalist economy it was necessary to undermine the power of the trade unions. The very development of the welfare state had led to the increasing influence of the labour movement and its enhanced ability to intervene and modify the profit making capacity of business. Hence Thatcherism developed a perspective that would mean an end to the consensus politics of the post-war period, or the end to the compromise politics inaugurated by the cold war. However it was not possible to justify the politics of class warfare by economic arguments exclusively. Instead it was necessary to uphold the ideological significance of the nation state. In many countries this took the form of the intensification of the cold war and increased military expenditure in order to justify the erosion of welfare state. In the UK this ideological process was also connected to the promotion of nationalism caused by the Falklands/Malvinas war of 1982. The popularity of this war provided the Thatcher government with the ideological justification to introduce anti-trade union legislation and allowed for preparation of a strategy for erosion of the influence of the unions. Engaging with the National Union of Mineworkers in 1984 was the most important aspect of this intensification of the class struggle. If the miners were to be defeated it would enable the government to reduce the influence of the unions in general terms. Despite heroic struggle the miners were effectively isolated and lacked serious trade union support. The defeat of the miners was a strategic defeat of the working class in general and resulted in the transformation of British industry in terms of mass unemployment and the end of the primacy of manufacturing. It could be argued that the very defeat of the miners’ strike meant the very social character of the working class changed and it became more white collar, female, and often without trade union organisation. It seemed that the ability of the forces of capital to dominate the role of labour had been established.

This situation led to serious intellectual questioning of the historical role of labour and it was argued that it could no longer represent a universal agency of change.(11) It was also argued that the most influential agency of change had become the new social movements of women, racial minorities and the sexually oppressed. However discussion of these issues often did not engage with the most strategic question which was about creating an alliance of the long term unemployed with the white collar and industrial working class. It was often sectional differences between these diverse sociological groups that enabled the ideology of capital to project itself as the expression of the national interest. Consequently it was these sectional differences combined with the ideological view that there is no alternative to capitalism that acted effectively to undermine the socialist culture of the past eighty years. The fact that the balance of class forces was in favour of capital in this period of the reactionary offensive enabled it to undermine the view that class struggle would be of benefit to the working class. However other aspects of the demise of socialist culture were expressed by the explicit rejection of any identity with socialism by the various Social Democratic organisations like the Labour Party. The repudiation of Clause 4 meant that the aim of a nationalised economy and welfare state was also rejected and instead the Labour party accepted that its major political task was to support the process of globalisation and making national capital competitive in global terms. In other words the working class did not consciously reject socialism rather the task of rejecting the aim of socialism was carried out by Social Democracy. This was actually a process of ideological illusion because since 1914 Social Democracy – apart from its radical left-wing – did not have a meaningful relation to socialism. However this point was not always understood by the working class.

It was argued by many Marxist groups that Social Democracy is based on the concept of a bourgeois workers party. This is established by the relation of the party to the trade unions. In the past this concept may have had explanatory value and is useful for understanding the role of Social Democracy in the period of the welfare state. However Social Democracy increasingly utilises the trade union connection in a formal sense for finances and electoral support and its major political objective is to establish harmonious relations with the transnational corporations. Hence it is necessary to define Social Democracy in terms of its policy and not formal sociological composition. This is why Social Democracy can be defined as the left-wing of the bourgeoisie in the era of globalisation. But this classification does not mean we should neglect the task of relating to the workers who still support Social Democracy. The united front can still be a part of the tactics required in order to develop mass support for socialism.

The demise of the Soviet Union and the end to its domination of Eastern Europe has also been considered as the decline of the credibility of socialism. This view suggests that the Soviet Union was the personification of socialism, and so the inability to adequately realise the welfare of Soviet citizens was because of the failings of socialism. However, we should reject this view because of the most important empirical fact that the rule of the bureaucratic elite cannot express a socialist society. Hence the distribution of resources was in accordance with the priorities of this bureaucracy and not on the basis of social need. This means the demise of the system was because of the contradictions generated by the domination of the bureaucracy and not because of the supposed failings of socialism. But because of the widespread illusion that the USSR was socialist meant its demise implied the end of the era of socialism. Consequently the demise of the USSR contributed to the erosion of the culture of socialism and promoted the view that there is no alternative to capitalism.

In other words the ideological effects of the offensive of capital, the transformation of Social Democracy, and the end of the USSR, undermined the spontaneous identity between the mass struggles of the working class and the culture of socialism. Support for the view that class struggle would somehow advance the prospect of a socialist society had been seriously undermined and instead the international working class had become a class without an ideology. The ideas of Marxism had little popular support and mass protests against war and austerity occurred without any systematic connection to socialism. It is popular to explain this situation in terms of the end of illusions in the connection between the working class and universal emancipation, or to suggest that the forces of change have become more specific and connected to the role of new social movements. Furthermore the ideological effect of the 30 year offensive by capital against labour has led to historical pessimism about the relation between the working class and socialism. Hence it is the crucial task of Marxist organisations to provide strategic arguments that would generate support for the connection between the social role of the working class and the objective of socialism.

Before addressing this issue more has to be said about the importance of the New Social Movements. Many advocates of the perspective of the strategic significance of the New Social Movements suggest that they represent an alternative to the agency of change that had been represented by the working class.(12) This view seems to be sociologically dubious because many of the so-called new social movements are an integral part of the working class such as low paid women workers. The same point would apply for black people and the sexually oppressed. In this context the actual strategic question is how to integrate the aspirations of the new social movements with the traditional objectives of the working class. The most important sociological division is between the industrial working class and the white collar strata, and it is this differentiation which primarily undermines the creation of unity between diverse subordinated social groups. It is addressing the various concerns of the different sections of the working class that would generate a strategy of resistance against the domination of capital. In this sense the supposedly contentious issue about the primary agencies of change in the contemporary world would become reduced to the more relevant question about how to realise working class unity and militancy in the period of the continued offensive of capital against labour.

Many of the Marxist groups must have hoped that the development of serious economic crisis in 2008 would reverse their declining situation. But what they did not recognise was that the decline of socialist culture had meant Marxism had become an apparent ideology of the past with little relevance for the present and future. Hence these groups effectively became pessimistic and unable to seriously address questions about the required strategy of struggle in a period of crisis and austerity. The only solitary voice in favour of the importance of developing a socialist strategy of struggle was that of Professor Meszaros.(13) It is vital that the Marxist Left address the question of strategy and class consciousness. It is also necessary that the regressive process of splits and fragmentation be ended and instead the Left should attempt to unite around a common strategy of class struggle. This process could then create the development of a common programme that would attempt to re-establish a connection between party and class. This relationship has only been tenuous during the long history of the contemporary class struggle. It has been the very dynamism of working class struggle that has almost exclusively established the practicality of the aim of socialism. However it is important to remember that the year of the most rewarding unity between party and class led to revolution and the prospect of world revolution. The re-establishment of this type of connection will not be repeated unless the Marxist Left rejects its present world of illusions and recognise its present lack of relevance for the tasks of the development of the class struggle. Only if the Marxist Left addresses these tasks and renews the strategy and programme of Marxism will it become relevant. In this context we can support the formation of the Left Unity organisation as a welcome step. However we can also be alarmed that it has not yet addressed issues of strategy and is instead preoccupied by constitutional and organisational questions. It is to be hoped that these limitations can be overcome and Left Unity becomes the focus for the promotion of struggle against austerity and for socialism.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIALISM AND THE WORKING CLASS

The very complexity of events has indicated that the conception of historical necessity that promotes the prospect of the transition to socialism is an illusion. In this context it can be argued that economic reasons do not constitute a sufficient basis for the demise of capitalism and its replacement by socialism. In other words the working class does not act in a manner that represents the imperatives of a so-called historical necessity. Hence there is not a teleological imperative or purpose to historical development that implies the possibility that the transformation of ancient society will eventually culminate in communism via the revolutionary action of the working class. Instead it can be argued that all those parties that have justified types of historical determinism, such as German Social Democracy and the Italian Socialist Party, have expressed a lack of strategic imagination about how to advance the possibility of the victory of socialism. They have not advocated a strategy that could express the potential for the class struggle to be successful. In contrast the Bolsheviks who were not advocates of historical determinism outlined a strategy of ‘All Power to the Soviets’ that was able to unite party and class in a resolute struggle to overthrow the bourgeois Provisional government.

Unfortunately this experience led to the view that the most important aspect of the process of proletarian revolution was the role of the party. This is why Trotsky in the ‘Lessons of October’ comments in an emphatic manner: “Without a party, apart from a party, over the heads of a party, or with a substitute for a party, the proletarian revolution cannot conquer.”(14) He reinforces this view with the following: “The proletarian revolution is precisely distinguished by the fact that the proletariat – in the person of its vanguard – acts in it not only as the main offensive force but also as the guiding force.”(15) It would appear that the working class has a role in this revolutionary process that is reduced to obeying the instructions of the party about the task of insurrection. But what the above summary of the class struggle has tried to outline was that the possibility of the development and success of the revolutionary process was based on the radicalisation and mass action of the working class. Only when the working class formed Soviets in 1917 was it possible for the Bolsheviks to formulate a strategy for the overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional government. Furthermore it was the fact that the Communist International ignored the revolutionary implications of the mass unrest in Germany relating to the French occupation of the Ruhr which indicated the elitist and one-sided standpoint of the Party vanguard conception of revolution. The German Communist Party conceived of a plan to seize power in 1923 and did not recognise that this proposed action was formulated in a period of the lull in the class struggle. The rigid interpretation of the lessons of the October revolution meant the Communist International neglected the importance of the role of the working class for the success of the proposed overthrow of capitalism. Rosa Luxemburg argues that the central task of principled Marxism in the period of the radicalisation of the working class is to provide political leadership for the mass strikes.(16) This is how the party relates to the class by suggesting forms of activity that can enhance the social power of the mass movement. In this manner the party can outline strategic ideas that can connect spontaneous struggle with a conscious aspiration for revolutionary transformation: “But it is high time for the working masses of Social Democracy to learn how to express their capacity for decision and action, and therewith to demonstrate their ripeness for that time of great struggles and great tasks in which they, the masses, will be the actual chorus and the directing bodies will merely act the “speaking parts”, that is, will only be the interpreters of the will of the masses.”(17)

If the Communist Party and Comintern had defined its revolutionary character in the manner described by Luxemburg it is possible that the mass unrest and radicalisation of the 1920’s and 1930’s would have led to successful struggles. Instead the elitism of the Communist International and the influence of the CPSU resulted in a perspective that the aims of the various mass struggles should be limited by the diplomatic interests of the Soviet Union. Hence the struggle against fascism should not be connected to the objective of socialism. The conception of party revolution had become consciously opposed to any prospect that mass struggle should become connected to the possible overthrow of capitalism. The tragedy of this development was that the spontaneous dynamic of the mass struggles was not sufficient to bring about the demise of the domination of capitalism and yet the role of the parties of the working class had become an expression of reformist and counterrevolutionary objectives. Furthermore, the International Left Opposition was too isolated from the working class to be able to influence events. However the Transitional Programme of 1938 was influenced by the lessons related to the strategic importance of spontaneous mass struggle. Trotsky’s conception of the revolutionary process became influenced by Luxemburgian themes: “The question is one of guarding the proletariat from decay, demoralization and ruin. The question is one of the life and death of the only creative and progressive class, and by that token of the future of mankind. If capitalism is incapable of satisfying the demands inevitably arising from the calamities generated by it, then let it perish. “Realizability” or “unrealizability” is in the given instance a question of the relationship of forces, which can be decided only by the struggle. By means of this struggle, no matter what its immediate practical successes may be, the workers will best come to understand the necessity of liquidating capitalist slavery.”(18)

Despite the occasional lapses into schematism caused by a rigid conception of the relationship between transitional demands, Trotsky is still capable of describing a revolutionary conception of class struggle. He recognises that it is the mass action of the working class which is the primary aspect of the prospect for socialism. However he is also aware that this struggle will not necessarily result in progressive consequences and instead the working class may be struggling to survive in a world of crisis, war and poverty. Hence despite the importance of the class struggle the results of history are effectively open-ended, and so the role of the party in this complex situation is to promote support for demands that can develop the strength of the mass movement. The interaction of party and class can enhance the possibility for the revolutionary transformation of society. This perspective is an effective rejection of the previous Comintern party conception of revolution and instead the Transitional Programme outlines how the mass struggle of the working class is the crucial aspect for generating the transformation of society. Hence the role of the party is to support and not undermine this process of mass struggle. In this context transitional demands are utilised in order to facilitate the dynamism of struggle. In the last analysis despite the valuable role of the party it is the strategic importance of the social role of the working class that will be decisive in relation to the prospect for socialism in a period of crisis, fascism and war.

It could be argued that the following comment indicates Trotsky’s continued attachment to the conception of party revolution: “The present crisis in human culture is the crisis in the proletarian leadership. The advanced workers, united in the Fourth International, show their class the way out of the crisis. They offer a program based on international experience in the struggle of the proletariat and of all the oppressed of the world for liberation. They offer a spotless banner.”(19) This proclamation of the political importance of the Fourth International does not justify the substitution of the role of the party in place of the class. Instead what is crucial about the Fourth International is that its programme is based on the experience of the working class since 1914. It outlines the strategic lessons of the class struggle and considers how this struggle can become successful with the connection to a revolutionary perspective. This comment does not deny the political and organisational primacy of the mass actions of the working class but it suggests that the theoretical role of the revolutionary party is to make suggestions as to how this mass struggle can become successful. The task is to unite the discontent and activity of the working class with the revolutionary programme of the party. This does not mean the class has to act in accordance with the dictates of the party and instead the role of the party is to promote the creativity, initiative and dynamism of the class struggle. The Fourth International acts to oppose the reactionary politics of the Second and Third Internationals in order to advance the possibility of the success of the mass struggle of the working class.

Nevertheless, Trotsky’s fluid dialectic of class struggle and the possibility of success or failure are still conceived in the traditional terms of historical necessity: “The orientation of the masses is determined first by the objective conditions of decaying capitalism and second by the treacherous politics of the old workers organizations. Of these factors, the first of course is the decisive one: the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus…..As time goes on, their desperate efforts to hold back the wheel of history will demonstrate more clearly to the masses that the crisis of proletarian leadership, having become the crisis in mankind’s culture, can be resolved only by the Fourth International.”(20) The apparent justification of the historic dialectic of the Second International is misleading and contrary to the general theoretical emphasis of Trotsky. This is because the overall emphasis on the relationship between the mass mobilisation of the working class and the importance of increasingly conscious tasks suggests that failure is a constant possibility. Only the development of the capacity of mass struggle can pose the prospect of success, and this outcome can only be defined as a tendency of the class struggle and not the expression of rigid historical laws because the forces of reaction may prove to be capable of withstanding and opposing the impulse for revolution. The strength of reaction is based on the influence of the traditional bourgeois parties, Fascism, Stalinism and Social Democracy. These organisations act to oppose the prospect of revolution in a period of crisis and war. This means the Fourth International has a challenging task to connect the principles and aims of a revolutionary programme with the spontaneous mass struggle. The complexity of these tasks means that Trotsky sometimes upholds the consolationist view that the laws of history are more effective than the role of the reactionary party. However his more profound understanding of the prospects of the class struggle means that his approach is based on the open-ended perspective of proletarian revolution or catastrophe. This latter prospect could take the form of the terrible effects of war or the deepening of the crisis. These possibilities could undermine the capacity of the working class to transform society. The actual tasks posed by the class struggle may overwhelm the tiny forces of the Fourth International.

 Historical confidence is actually combined with pessimism in the standpoint of Trotsky. He recognises from the events of the past twenty years that the prospects of success in the class struggle are seriously undermined by the various forces of reaction. But he also knows that despite these problems the dynamism of mass struggle can pose the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society. The role of the Fourth International is to outline a programme that can promote class struggle and enable the working class to be able to tackle the problems posed by the politics of reaction in a more effective manner. However the situation is not necessarily favourable in these terms because of the reactionary effects of war. Thus optimism about the ultimate political effects of war is combined with an understanding of how it can uphold the influence of reaction: “At the beginning of the war the sections of the Fourth International will inevitably feel themselves isolated: every war takes the national masses unawares and impels them to the side of the governmental apparatus. The internationalists will have to swim against the stream. However the devastation and misery brought about by the new war, which in the first months will far outstrip the bloody horrors of 1914-18, will quickly prove sobering. The discontent of the masses and their revolt will grow by leaps and bounds. The sections of the Fourth International will be found at the head of the revolutionary tide.”(21)

This prediction is based on a lapse into subjectivism and voluntarism. It is being suggested that with the correct programme the Fourth International will inevitably become the leadership of the working class. The conception of prediction is conceived in terms of rigid determinism and euphoria. However the actual limitations of the Transitional Programme proved to be an important factor that undermined the prospect of the development of the influence of the Fourth International within the working class. This is because the analysis of the present situation within the Programme was flawed by the failure to construct a perspective based on the relationship between fascism and war. The character of the forthcoming world war was not connected to the reactionary expansionist aims of Fascism. Instead what was implied by the section in the programme on ‘Imperialism and war’ was that the character of the First World War would be repeated in relation to the development of the Second World War. Hence it was being argued that war would result in revolution and this one-sided perspective ignored the importance of the strength of the counterrevolutionary forces that would be involved in the Second World War. Thus Trotsky’s Transitional Programme underestimated the forthcoming role of Fascism and the necessity for the international working class to develop a response that was different to that of Stalinism and the various bourgeois democratic powers. Hence the justification of an anachronistic policy contributed to the isolation of the Fourth International from the international working class during the Second World War. This meant bourgeois democracy and Stalinism emerged triumphant and the necessity for the Fourth International to revise its perspectives became an urgent question. Primarily it was necessary to adapt to the renewed stabilisation of capitalism. The prospect of proletarian revolution had become long-term and the central task was to promote socialist culture within the working class in the conditions of the cold war. It also became necessary to confront the influence of the view that questioned the very relation of the working class to socialism. This task was made especially important in the period of the offensive of capital against labour in the 1980’s.

AN APPRAISAL OF THE ORTHODOX MARXIST ATTEMPT TO UPHOLD THE REVOLUTIONARY CHARACTER OF THE WORKING CLASS

Ralph Miliband carried out an important defence of what he considered to be the view that the working class can become revolutionary and promote the socialist transformation of society.(22) He did not defend this standpoint in terms of some philosophical dogma about the supposed historical mission of the working class, and nor did he deny the possibility for workers to adopt reactionary ideas or support the approach of reformism. Instead he suggests that Marx was correct to develop the perspective that the extraction of surplus value by the forces of capital expressed exploitation within the relations of production. This meant antagonism between capital and labour was an inherent part of a capitalist society. The result of this class conflict could be socialism. Miliband maintains that the most satisfactory definition of the working class involves all those people that earn a living by the sale of their labour power. This would include both manual and many forms of white collar labour.(23) Hence he does not believe that the increasing white collar transformation of the sociological character of labour will inherently undermine the militancy of the working class in general. He argues that resistance to the demands of the employers has been a constant feature of all the various technological periods of capitalism. However he also accepts that this type of class struggle will not necessarily become the promotion of socialist objectives.

What his view underestimates is addressing the question of how the representatives of capital will attempt to relate structural changes within the workforce to undermining the ability of labour to influence the character of the relations of production. For example, has globalisation meant that labour no longer has the structural capacity to uphold its interests in both defensive and offensive terms? Instead of an extensive discussion of what was possibly the most crucial strategic question of the 1980’s, Miliband tries to avoid systematic discussion of the issues raised by the structural transformation of the contemporary economy and its importance for the prospects of class struggle and socialism: “The fact of rapid change is not in question. What is very much in question, however, is the claim that changes have fundamentally transformed the character of advanced capitalist societies, and that this in turn requires an equally fundamental transformation of the socialist agenda. For notwithstanding a torrent of propaganda to the contrary, advanced capitalist societies are now and will remain highly structured and hierarchical class societies. The precise composition of the different social classes will no doubt undergo further and considerable modifications, but the social structure itself…….may be expected to endure for a long time to come.”(24)

This view is a complacent analysis of the importance of the recent social changes and therefore expresses the standpoint that nothing has really changed. His view represents static reasoning that denies the ability of capital to put labour on the defensive because of the very character of the changes to the economy and society. Miliband suggests that the real issue is how the working class will respond to the demands of capital in the coming period, but the point is what if its power for militant action has been undermined by the significance of the structural changes? He dismisses the view that class conflict can no longer generate the prospect of socialism and instead maintains: “The alternative scenario is based on the notion that advanced capitalism will inevitably generate further and more acute class struggle from below, not only over immediate and specific grievances and demands, but also over larger aspirations involving the achievement of deep, ‘structural’ transformations in the social system in the direction of socialism.”(25) But the point is that this conclusion is an expression of dogma unless a satisfactory understanding of the structural capacity of the working class in the recent period is provided. Miliband’s comment amounts to empty boasting unless it is connected to the elaboration of a systematic conception of the social role and power of the working class in the present period. Instead of serious consideration being given to these questions he argues that the objective of socialism is not connected to revolution. This perspective enables him to gloss over the importance of the erosion of socialist culture because of the very importance of the offensive of capital and the structural changes to the economy. In other words by diluting the issues involved in the realisation of socialism he can re-connect socialism to the goals of constitutionally defined Social Democracy. What is ignored is the uncomfortable empirical fact that Social Democracy has rejected any relationship to socialism. By default the revolutionary character of socialism is affirmed by the very right-wing development of Social Democracy. However, the question still remains: is the working class structurally able to promote and aspire to the goal of socialism?

Miliband asserts dogmatically that we have no reasons to believe that the process of class struggle from below has ended.(26) Empirically he cannot be refuted because the very continuation of capitalism will always generate localised struggles and even result in limited general strikes. However is it possible to connect contemporary forms of militancy with the aim of socialism? This question is of an urgent character because even the onset of crisis and austerity has not generated struggles that express the conscious aspiration for socialism. In relation to the standpoint of Miliband the point is that his view is based on the theoretical generalisation that the working class of the contemporary period remains disadvantaged, exploited and alienated, and with the prospect of mass unemployment. Hence the suggestion is that at some point this situation will result in the intensification of the class struggle. However his standpoint is not based on analysis of the recent developments in the class struggle and the establishment of a precise consideration of the balance of class forces. For example he does not seem to have considered how the Miners strike of 1984 in the UK resulted in the decreased strength of the trade unions and so facilitated the realisation of the enhanced domination of capital over labour. Instead he argues that the period of conservative political rule in countries like the UK has not resulted in important ideological shifts of opinion. The implication is that the renewal of the class struggle is inevitable. He contends that the major reason for the failure to realise socialism is the expressed by the lack of ambition and the reformist character of Social Democracy. This is an important point but it still does not address the complexity of the relationship between the class struggle and the aim of socialism. For example, how do we transcend the limitation of defensive struggle and instead develop an offensive struggle for socialism? However the answer of Miliband to this type of question is to effectively evade it and suggest that what is required is the development of socialism from above in the form of the election of a radical Social Democratic government with strong popular support from the trade unions and the democratic impulses within society. How Social Democracy can be transformed into this type of socialist party is a mystery that Miliband does not solve.

Miliband assumes that the Left government would be able to overcome the resistance represented by the forces of globalisation and implement its programme. He argues that the realisation of the aims of socialism would be enhanced by the transformation of the state in order to make it receptive to left-wing objectives. He suggests that the government would extend public ownership, be dedicated to the principle of equality and express the alliance of the government with popular power from below. It would be based on the principle of democratic accountability.(27) But it could be argued in reply t this perspective that it does not express the dynamism of mass struggle as the defining feature of the process of the transformation of society. Hence what is not occurring is the intensification of class struggle to the point where the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society can occur. Instead the process of change is dependent on the actions of a government that has not been created by the process of mass struggle and is instead the outcome of the role of Parliamentary democracy. But as Mezaros explains this situation will not result in the erosion of the power of capital: “Capital is the extra-parliamentary force par excellence which cannot possibly be politically constrained by parliament in its power of social metabolic control……..And precisely because capital is the extra-parliamentary force par excellence, it has nothing to fear from the reforms that can be enacted within its parliamentary political framework.”(28) This comment is not meant to suggest that capital is omnipotent instead what is being implied is that only the social force of labour can undermine the domination of capital. This prospect cannot occur via the illusion of socialism from above and instead requires the intensification of class struggle from below. The contest for economic and political power is between the contending forces of capital and labour and it is an illusion to suggest that a determined left government in Parliament can be the agency of this process of class struggle. Unfortunately Miliband also evades the issue as to whether the modern working class is capable of realising the aim of socialism and instead projects the aspiration for a new society onto a process from above. This evasion means that vital strategic questions are left unanswered.

If we analyse the present situation within Europe we can establish that the central contradiction remains that between capital and labour. It is only possible to resolve the crisis at the expense of the working class by undermining its material situation and by massive cuts of public expenditure. However the trade union leadership are only in favour of defensive action and reject any consideration of militancy. The working class has not been able to overcome the limitations of the role of the trade union bureaucracy and so has not been able to transform the unions into fighting organs of the working class. This situation is connected to the decline in the influence of the shop stewards movement. Furthermore the decline of the importance of large scale collective workplace units seems to have fragmented the social power of the working class. The working class seems to have become differentiated, and therefore sectional limitations appear to undermine the prospect of a united response to the situation of crisis and austerity. But despite these problems militant actions has occurred within Europe against the austerity policy of the EU elites. The urgent strategic question becomes can these militant actions become a conscious struggle for socialism? Is the working class capable of supporting the aspiration for socialism in terms of the transformation of its consciousness and in structural terms? In attempting to answer this question we must recognise that the offensive of capital since the 1980’s has undermined the socialist culture of the working class. It is questionable whether people have any coherent notion of what socialism is and why it could replace capitalism as a superior type of economic and political system. However it is possible that the very development of mass struggle could promote views and aspirations about socialism. But we also have to be realistic and admit that existing struggles have not yet created this prospect. Instead the view that there is not an alternative to capitalism is still very influential. Hence it has to be a crucial task of the Marxist left to try and generate popular support for socialism. The interaction of the renewed influence of Marxism combined with the militancy of the class struggle could be a vital aspect of the generation of contemporary support for socialism. Consequently the present failure of Marxist groups to address this issue is undermining the possibility for the re-birth of socialist culture within the working class.

But even if we assume that relative success can be achieved in relation to the renewal of the importance of socialist ideas the structural and strategic question still has to be addressed as to whether the working class is capable in the post-modern era of changing society in terms of addressing the unequal relations between capital and labour?(29) In response to some sceptical views about Marxism concerning the fact that the working class rejects being a revolutionary agency of change it can be argued that history has often resulted in some surprises. One of the most important features of the last hundred years has been the reactionary role of so-called socialist parties in undermining the dynamism of the class struggle. In the last hundred years periods of what could be described as being tranquil in the class struggle have been followed by years of upheaval. It is important not to forget that the recent offensive of capital against labour has led to some resistance. The recent economic crisis has led to renewed militancy within the EU. Consequently we can only resolve the important structural question about the capacity of the working class in practice. Does the modern working class have the social influence required to impose its aspirations onto society? Will these aspirations express the objective of socialism? In other words if these questions are to be answered Marxists need to agitate for a strategy that would represent the ability of the structural power of the working class to be able to challenge the imperatives of capital. The Democratic Socialist Alliance believes that this type of strategy would be expressed by the perspective of an indefinite European general strike against the austerity policy. Success of this policy would pose the issue as to what type of society should represent an alternative to the domination of capital. However, failure to develop popular support for this strategy would mean that the importance of the structural question about the capabilities of the modern working class had not been resolved.

 Ralph Miliband was not unaware of the difficulties involved in the development of the class struggle caused by the offensive of capital since the 1980’s. But he is content to suggest that these difficulties can be overcome by a process of socialism from above. This means the actual issues of class struggle from below are not effectively tackled. In other words Miliband does not address the issue of the decline of the working class in its political and industrial authority, employment and economic status, and image caused by the politics of governments like that of Thatcher. One author suggests that: “The essence of the argument presented here is that………there was a decline in the corporate strength and identity of the working class as a whole, due partly to economic circumstances and partly to the onset of aggressive Conservatism which rejected consensus politics, stressed market forces and individual advancement and had severe repercussions on the welfare services.”(30) In other words the enhanced influence and social power of the working class connected to the rise of the welfare state has come to an end, and this period has been replaced by the era of the re-emergence of the importance of the market. The result is the decline and fragmentation of the working class. It is being argued that the ability of the working class to intervene collectively in order to alter the economic and political situation has come to an end.

This comment was made when the forces of aggressive market politics seemed to be unquestioned, and Marxists like Ralph Miliband failed to address the issues about the apparent decline of the strength and influence of the working class. It could be argued that the onset of serious crisis has meant the confidence of the ruling class has been undermined and the prospect of the resurgence of a working class politics has been created. This is possible but the relationship between the working class and socialism is still in doubt. Meszaros addresses this point in his monumental work: ‘Beyond Capital’(31) He suggests that a structural crisis of capitalism has developed in the recent period. This means the following: “On a historically relevant scale, an age of transition is initiated the moment the dominant forces of the old order are forced by an acute crisis to adopt remedies which would be totally unacceptable to them without that crisis, introducing, thus, an alien body into the original structure, with ultimately destructive consequences, no matter how beneficial the immediate results.”(32) He accepts that this view does not mean the prospect of an inevitable or automatic transition to socialism, and it is possible that barbarism could be the alternative to socialism, but the justification of the conception of historical necessity is provided by the perspective that the structural crisis of capitalism must objectively pose the issue to the working class of the importance of a strategy that would resolve this crisis by the transcendence of the domination of capital. What is not explained is how and why a working class that has been primarily influenced by reformist type politics would act in the manner required by the socialist offensive because of the significance of the structural crisis of capitalism. The inference is that the very transition to socialism is established by the character of the crisis of capitalism and so the economic and political conditions are created for the working class to respond to this situation.

Meszaros is arguing that the very capacity of the working class to influence the economic and political situation is the result of the structural crisis of capitalism. The prospect of the socialist offensive is the expression of the structural crisis having the effect of the radicalisation of the working class. In this context the structural crisis will indicate the limitations of the previous defensive strategies of the working class and instead establishes the superiority of the socialist offensive. The general historical conditions define the political choices that people will make and this means that the character of the situation favours the development of mass support for the socialist offensive: “For the truth is that there is a limit beyond which forced accommodation and newly imposed sacrifices become intolerable not only subjectively for the individuals concerned, but objectively as well for the continued functioning of the still dominant social/economic framework. In this sense, and none other, the historical actuality of the socialist offensive – as synonymous with the end of the system of relative improvements through consensual improvements - is bound to assert itself in the longer run.”(33)

It is interesting that Meszaros’s argument is not dependent on any idealist relationship between Marxism and the working class. Instead his perspective depends on the importance of social being and how the increasing contradictions of capitalism are generating the prospect of socialist mass consciousness and the prospect of the socialist offensive. He is contending that the attempts of capital to consolidate its domination over labour are no longer effective in this situation of structural crisis, and the various defensive strategies of Social Democracy are increasing inadequate. In this context the only strategy that corresponds to the material interests of the working class is that provided by Marxism and this implies that only the demise of the domination of capital will represent the result that brings about the realisation of a better and more equal society. However the important problem with this standpoint is that it must rely on an economic determinist approach that denies the significance of the political and ideological aspects that undermine the development of socialist mass consciousness. Primarily he does not accept the importance of the recent offensive of capital and its significance for changing the balance of class forces in favour of the domination of capital over labour. Instead he suggests in rigid and dogmatic terms that the limitations of the existing system will become so intolerable that the only political outcome is the intensification of the class struggle on the basis of popular support for the socialist offensive. However it could also be suggested that the very effectiveness of the offensive of capital is the generation of demoralisation within the working class, or the promotion of militancy that actually lacks the purpose of socialism. These prospects for the undermining of socialist culture are not explored by Meszaros. Instead his advocacy of the socialist offensive becomes the justification of the dogmatic view that it is likely to occur.

He does accept that the prospect of the socialist offensive will not occur in the short-term. However this argument is connected to the prediction that it still likely to happen: “It must be emphasised again that…….the historical actuality of the socialist offensive – due to the exhaustion of the self-serving concessions which capital could make in the past to a defensively articulated labour movement – does not mean that success is assured and its realization is in our immediate vicinity. Being ‘historical’ here indicates, on the one hand, that the necessity of instituting some fundamental changes in the orientation and organization of the socialist movement has appeared on the historical agenda; and, on the other, that the process in question unfolds under the pressure of powerful historical determinations, pushing the social agency of labour in the direction of a sustained strategic offensive if its wants to realize not only its potentially all-embracing transformatory objectives but even its limited ones. The road ahead is likely to be very hard, and certainly not one that can be side-stepped or altogether avoided.”(34)

It is interesting that Meszaros projects onto ‘history’ the empirical difficulties that will be created by the possibility of the development of the socialist offensive. He admits that the task of generating support for the socialist offensive will be difficult, but that this problem is likely to be solved because of the limitations expressed by the structural crisis of capitalism. The fact that concessions to labour are increasingly unlikely will promote the possibility of the socialist offensive. He does not allow for the possibility that concessions to labour can still be possible despite the structural crisis such as the availability of cheap credit in order to compensate for low wage increases. But the most important aspect of criticism of his views concerns the ideological fact that the working class for various reasons does not acknowledge the depth and character of the crisis. The prospect of the demise of capitalism is not expressed by popular common sense and instead the view that concessions can still be obtained has not been replaced by the perspective of the socialist offensive. In this context Social Democracy still remains influential and mass support for conservatism is important. Hence there is a discrepancy between the actuality of the structural crisis and how it is perceived in terms of the views of the working class. The result of this discrepancy is that the socialist offensive has not developed.

Meszaros would argue that these complications do not invalidate the necessity of the socialist offensive. This is true but it is vital that the justification of the socialist offensive does not acquire the status of inevitability or the imperatives of historical laws. However, Meszaros does utilise this rigid form of reasoning and the result is dogmatic support for the prospect of the socialist offensive. This also means that he is very perfectionist about the question of tactics. The only principled tactics are those that being about the demise of the domination of capital. He can justify this ultimatism because the logic of the socialist offensive is to bring about the end of the hegemony of capital over labour. Hence he rejects any concessions as an unprincipled accommodation to the interests of capital: “In this sense, whatever concessions, obtained by labour, are compatible with, and containable by, the expansion-orientated and accumulation driven capital system, and by the same token unfit to alter the defensive posture and structurally subordinate position of capital’s antagonist towards its adversary. This remains the case irrespective of how sharp might be the periodic clashes and confrontation –including even a most dramatic general strike – through which labour’s gains are in the end conceded by capital.”(35)

His standpoint amounts to the rigid posture that only proletarian revolution represents the principled outcome of the socialist offensive. He denies the possibility of partial victories and the role of compromise and orderly retreats. It would be more flexible to suggest that the socialist offensive had the ultimate aim of the revolutionary transformation of society but that this aim can be understood in the flexible manner that it expresses a protracted process of struggle with the possibility of setback and advances .These advances could alter the balance of class forces in favour of labour but without bringing about the end of the domination of capital. In this context Meszaros’s effective dismissal of the role of the general strike is dogmatic because the success of an effective general strike could result in significant advances in the class struggle even if capitalism is not yet overthrown. For example, in the present situation the victory of the general strike could end the austerity policy and mean the strength of the working class was immensely advanced. In other words the role of the socialist offensive is not to uphold the simplistic politics of either/or, but instead it is a crucial barometer of the progress being made in the class struggle. What is crucial is the task of generating support for the socialist offensive, and it is this task which Meszaros underestimates because of his reliance on the role of economic or structural determinism in order to resolve complex political questions. Crucially, he does not elaborate the reasons why labour may reject the perspective of the socialist offensive despite the depth of the crisis of capitalism. Instead he assumes that support for the socialist offensive will ultimately develop and generate effective opposition to the domination of capital.

Meszaros justifies the above stance in relation to his criticism of partial demands: “The socialist movement has no chance of success of against capital by raising only a set of partial demands. For such demands must always prove their viability within the pre-established limits and regulatory determinations of the capital system. T o talk about parts makes sense only if they can be related to the whole to which they objectively belong. In this sense, only within the overall terms of reference of the socialist hegemonic alternative to the rule of capital can the validity strategically chosen objectives be properly judged. And the criteria of assessment must be their suitability (or not) to become lasting and cumulative achievements in the hegemonic enterprise of radical transformation.”(36) This standpoint represents a recipe for confusion because it cannot differentiate between objectives that adapt to the capital system from aims that can partially undermine the domination of the system. It is a crucial task of the advocates of the socialist offensive to make this type of differentiation and to be able to propagate demands that result in the undermining of the system. These demands and their results may not bring about the end of capitalism but their successful accomplishment will promote the confidence of the working class to carry on the struggle for socialism.

In contrast Meszaros’s strategic stance of ‘all or nothing’ fails to recognise that the question of support for the socialist offensive is not immediate and fully conscious. This is precisely why partial demands have a crucial role in developing an understanding that reforms are not sufficient. The prospect of the obtaining of partial demands is a vital aspect of generating the belief that the consolidation of these demands requires the continual struggle for socialism. Hence the character of partial demands is an integral aspect of the striving for socialism and they do not represent the dilution of revolutionary objectives. Ultimately it has to be acknowledged that the creation of support for partial demands, such as an end to austerity, expresses an introduction to the aims of socialism. Instead Meszaros justifies the rigid logic that people can acquire revolutionary consciousness without any relation to partial demands, or alternatively these partial demands can only be interpreted as the form of socialism. This ultra-left reasoning is part of his underestimation of the difficulties involved in developing support for the objective of socialism.

However despite the criticism that can be made of Meszaros’s approach it can be argued that he is aware of the complexity of his standpoint: “The necessity and historical actuality of the socialist offensive does not mean the advocacy of some facile, naively optimistic, immediately agitational perspective. Far from it. For, in the first place, the historical actuality of a process of transformation – as arising from the manifold, uneven/conflicting determinations of an objective historical tendency – refers to the historical phase in its entirety, with all the complications and potential relapses, and not to some sudden event that produces an unproblematical linear development.”(37) But this sober analysis of a complex process of development is reconciled with the rigidity of determinism and the prospect of ultimate success in the class struggle: “In this sense, ‘historical actuality’ means precisely what it says: the emergence and unfolding actualisation of a trend in all its historical complexity, embracing a whole historical era or epoch and delimiting its strategic parameters – for better or worse as the case might be under the changing circumstances – and ultimately asserting the fundamental tendency of the epoch in question, notwithstanding all fluctuations, unevenness and even relapses.”(38) In other words despite the complications involved in the class struggle the laws of transition and the realisation of socialism will ultimately assert themselves. This perspective implies the view that the socialist offensive will inherently be successful. The character of history does not allow for any other possibility, apart from that of catastrophe or barbarism.

This reliance on historical determinism is unsatisfactory because it does not explain the actual complexity of the class struggle and the difficulty of the problems involved in the realisation of socialism. Nor can Meszaros explain the present lack of popular support for socialism. Hence the conception of historical necessity is unable to relate to the problems posed by empirical events. If we are to construct a more adequate conception of the class struggle and its relationship to socialism we have to establish an approach that is more flexible and yet is also intransigent in its principles. In this context we have to conceive of working class politics as it is and not in terms of the mystifications of the historical process. Hence we have to recognise that the actual support for the aim of socialism is virtually non-existent. For example an important survey of the attitudes of French and British workers conducted in the 1980’s (before the offensive of capital) established that dissatisfaction with the system did not mean support for a social alternative. Instead the character of criticism could be described as reformist: “The evidence suggests that the class resentment of French workers had become politicized in the sense that it fuelled substantial discontent with the existing political regime and that French workers looked to political action as a means of reducing social inequality. However there are few signs that revolutionary class consciousness was prevalent in the sense which it is generally understood. French workers discontent with prevailing economic institutions led primarily to a desire for an extension of collective bargaining rather than to a desire for a fundamentally different form of property ownership. Equally, their greater sense of class deprivation was associated not with the rejection of the values of liberal democratic institutions but with an assertion of the importance of extending the powers of Parliament. French workers certainly revealed political class consciousness to a greater extent than British workers, but, for the greater part it was a reformist rather than a revolutionary consciousness.”(39)

The attitudes of British workers were often more conservative and expressed higher levels of satisfaction with the system despite a perception of inequality and a bias in favour of the rich. For both French and British workers the question of what was socialism would be was an abstract issue that had little practical meaning. However the history of the class struggle has indicated that the development of mass activity has created new horizons and made workers receptive to new ideas such as the issue of socialism. This point was understood by Trotsky concerning the social upheavals of the 1930’s and he incorporated the relationship of mass struggle to the prospect of socialism in his Transitional Programme. In other words mass struggle for different generations reinvents the connection between the role of the mass movement and what we mean by socialism. It is entirely possible that an upsurge of struggle against austerity in the present could generate new forms of support for the objective of socialism. People could recognise that their very actions were making the aim of socialism relevant for the present era. However this possibility has not yet been realised. Hence the role of Marxism is to construct a credible action programme of struggle that could generate support for militant opposition to the austerity policy. In addition it is a vital task for Marxists to construct detailed conceptions of why socialism would be superior to capitalism. The work of Meszaros has been important in this regard, and in ‘Beyond Capital’ he describes a vision of socialism that is able to tackle problems such as the division of labour and the enduring influence of capital.(40) Furthermore, Marxism should be concerned to critique the influential views of bourgeois ideology in order to promote the generation of revolutionary class consciousness. The role of Marxism is crucial if people are to reinvent socialist culture in the period of the offensive of capital against labour.

But it would be dogmatic to understand these issues in terms of the conception of historical necessity. The analysis of Meszaros’s conception of the socialist offensive has tried to outline how his approach is undermined by the influence of the approach of historical necessity. Firstly, a flexible appreciation of the significance of empirical events and changing circumstances is replaced by the false confidence that history is ‘changing in our direction’. It was this type of illusory reasoning that led to the disorientation of the Second International in relation to the outbreak of the First World War. Secondly, the support of Meszaros for the approach of historical necessity means that he glosses over the impact of important events and instead fails to acknowledge the present lack of support within the working class for the principles of the socialist offensive. Instead he assumes that the structural crisis of capitalism will generate automatic support for the socialist offensive. Hence he underestimates the influence of bourgeois ideology and the prevalent domination of the view that there is no alternative to capitalism. The result is that he defends the rationalist standpoint that the superior ideas of the socialist offensive will generate mass support. This means he ignores the regressive effect of the past period of defeats in the class struggle.

Thirdly, it is entirely possible that the class struggle will develop because of unexpected events that cannot be defined in terms of the criteria of historical necessity such as the importance of the growth of the productive forces and the increased numerical weight of the working class. For example, the radicalisation of the First World War period was connected to the enhancement of the power of the bourgeois state and its increased intervention into the activity of the economy. This attempt to utilise the role of the state for the purposes of the war actually resulted in the belief within the working class that the state could be utilised for the purposes of the common good. The result was an enhanced sense of hope within the working class that the future could be better than the present. This view led to increased militancy and the development of struggle against war and in favour of a egalitarian society: “In all the societies that were involved in the war from an early stage, societal war mobilization implied, then, an unprecedentedly high level of casualties, a major upheaval of traditional patterns of social structure, a greatly heightened degree of state intervention and an increased visibility of the collective character of social relations. Each of these factors is likely to have contributed to the great wave of working class radicalism that swept all of these societies at the close of the war. For they encouraged high levels of personal bitterness with the regimes that were responsible for launching the war, the disintegration of the sense of the necessity and naturalness of traditional patterns of social organization, a new awareness that social change could be introduced through purposive political action and a greater sensitivity to social inequality at a time when war had dramatically heightened the visibility of a society’s dependence on the commitment of the working class. This was likely to undermine the legitimacy of the traditional order and to generate powerful aspirations for change in the structures of capitalist society.”(41)

Fourthly, it is entirely possible that the actual existing defensive character of class struggle may not be overcome and replaced by an offensive strategy influenced by Marxism. This is because of reasons of inertia, tradition, and the influential view that the reformist approach is most compatible with the class interests of the workers. The point being made is that is entirely possible that struggles will not be receptive to the aims of socialism and instead remain defensive in character because of empirical circumstances. It is also possible that Marxism will be unprepared for the challenges that are created by the onset of mass struggles. Indeed it could be argued that struggles against austerity will not occur. In any eventuality the illusory imperatives of historical necessity will not advance the progress of the class struggle. Instead the character of the class struggle is dependent on the level of consciousness of its participants. The failure to overcome the lack of support for socialism will mean that struggles will continue to be dominated by the bureaucratic inertia of the trade union leadership. Only the effectiveness of Marxism can create a possible situation in which the struggles become connected to the aim of socialism.

However this prospect is being undermined by the fact that some Marxist organisations are using the lack of popular support for socialism as a pretext for diluting their aims and objectives. The majority of the Left Unity organisation explicitly supports a reformist perspective because of the supposed rejection of socialism by the working class. This standpoint implies that people have undergone a conscious process of rejection of socialism. However what has actually happened is that the erosion of the socialist culture of the past has meant that in the period of the offensive of capital the capacity to know what is meant by socialism has been undermined. Hence the development of support for socialism means the importance of a conscious process of the reinvention of socialism for the present generation. This is why the tasks of Marxism are so crucial. Marxism has to establish the theoretical principles of what is meant by socialism if it is to become a doctrine with practical credibility. Ultimately socialism is an aim that can only be upheld by the role of mass actions but before this process can occur it is an objective that is sustained by intellectual reasoning. This is why Meszaros is so concerned to defend the validity of socialism against the criticism of supporters of capitalism like Hayek. Being able to refute in theoretical terms the views of advocates of capitalism is the first step in the process of the renewal of the credibility of the perspective of socialism. The success of the tasks of the Marxist intellectual will then possibly influence the very character of the development of class struggle.

It is entirely possible that the present period of crisis and austerity will not generate effective struggle for change and socialism. If this development occurs, Marxists should not become pessimistic and dilute their objectives in order to become relevant and popular. Instead Marxists should improve their theory so that it could relate to any future struggles. The point is that we do not have to believe in historical necessity in order to recognise that the domination of capital over labour creates constant tensions and discontent. However these discontents do not indicate the movement of history in a particular direction. Instead it is entirely possible that these tensions will remain unresolved and the reasons for their generation will not be tackled by either the supporters of capital or labour. After the boom of the post-war period we can characterise the situation as one of increasing crisis and the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism. But this situation is not mechanically and automatically expressed in growing support for socialism. Instead what has occurred is an economic and ideological counterrevolution that has facilitated the domination of capital over labour and eroded the remnants of socialist culture. Unfortunately Meszaros glosses over these aspects when outlining his arguments in favour of the socialist offensive. In other words, he seems to ignore the arguments of his previous book ‘Power of Ideology’ when he outlines the ability of the present system to undermine the influence of oppositional views within society: “The difficulties in drawing a valid line of demarcation between the rejection of abstract moralizing appeals on the one hand and ideological abdication, on the other, are truly daunting. Moreover, they seem to multiply, rather than diminish, parallel to the way in which the complex historical process brings to maturity capital’s inner contradictions. As if the rules that regulate the fundamental social confrontation in actuality could be constantly rewritten and the ‘goalposts’ accordingly moved, so as to suit the conveniences of the established order. For, in tune with the nature of more or less consciously pursued historical strategies and corresponding transformations, capital can adjust its defences to the moves of its adversary with all the means at its disposal, which happens to be truly immense both on the economic plane and within the legal/political sphere.”(42)

The crucial point being made by Meszaros is that Marxists should never underestimate the economic, political and ideological durability of capitalism. Consequently the existing system is characterised by an ability to neutralise, absorb or simply defeat the forces of opposition and mass resistance. He is suggesting that the supporters of anti-capitalism have not yet been able to develop a strategy that can effectively establish the criteria that would represent the possibility of undermining the existing system. However this view represents an over-generalisation about the history of the class struggle. This is because mass activity has generated the prospect of the overthrow of the domination of capital. Hence the failure to realise this possibility has been because of the limitations of the various parties claiming to be socialist. Hence the durability of capitalism, as described by Meszaros, is consolidated by the process of adaptation of the various parties that have described themselves as revolutionary and socialist. In this context the spontaneous dynamic of the working class is not sufficient to promote the realisation of the demise of the domination of capital. This situation is reinforced by the forces of tradition, inertia, social mobility and the gains of the welfare state that have represented important reasons why the perspective of socialism is defined as being futile. Primarily the very existence of capitalism and the apparent futility of the cause of socialism also act to ensure that people adapt to the existing situation rather than act to bring about the replacement of capitalism with socialism.

It is important to establish that opposition to the perspective of historical necessity does not mean support for voluntarism. The capital-labour relationship represents a structural mechanism that influences the actions, behaviour and views of its participants. This structure explains the reasons for discontent within society and also the possibilities for the apparent reconciliation of the interests of capital and labour. However the character of the structure of the capital-labour process does not suggest the expression of tendencies for historical resolution of its contradictions in terms that favour socialism. This is why it is necessary to reject the illusory false optimism of the concept of historical necessity. But it is also necessary to reject the view that the forces of capital have resolved the class struggle in their favour. Instead the very structural character of the capital-labour relation is open-ended and so implies that capital can generate imperatives that facilitate the subordination of labour, but alternatively labour is capable of immense acts of resistance and opposition to its domination by capital. In other words, so-called history has not spoken in favour of capital or labour and instead we have a strategic impasse in which the present balance of forces favour the hegemony of capital over labour. Opportunities for the erosion of the ascendency of capital have not been realised and to some extent this situation haunts and undermines the class consciousness of labour in the present.

Frank Parkin has argued that the tendency towards the de-radicalisation of the working class can be overcome and transformed by the development of a party with a radical value system: “European socialist movements based on an egalitarian ideology, and having their own distinct traditions, heroes, songs, slogans and political imagery, have created a composite political culture in which class perceptions and evaluations occupy a central place. This type of class-oriented meaning system is an important counterweight to that of the dominant order not only in an obvious political sense, but also at an individual level. That is, attachment to the ideals of socialism can provide men with a sense of personal identity and moral worth which is denied them by the dominant value system. Judged by the standards of the dominant class, manual workers contributions to society are not highly regarded, and they rank relatively low in the scale of social honour. The radical value system, on the other hand, affirms the dignity of labour and accords the worker a position of honour in the hierarchy of esteem. Members of the subordinate class who endorse radical values are thus provided not merely with a certain explanatory framework for the interpretation of social facts, but also with a more favourable social identity.”(43)

The problem with this comment is that whilst it is able to provide a reason why workers may support parties with a radical socialist agenda, Parkin is unable to connect this view with the question of the prospect of the realisation of socialism. It is entirely possible that workers may be provided with psychological well-being through the role of parties with a radical value system and yet the strategic issue of how to achieve socialism is still problematical. Parkin does not connect the role of these parties to the promotion of class struggle and the issue of advance to the possibility of socialism. Instead it could be argued that the parties of the radical value system express a type of alienated consciousness in that they provide a sense of esteem for the working class and yet the prospect of socialism still remains effectively unobtainable. Parties of a Stalinist character have expressed this type of character and so have failed to elaborate a strategy that could connect the radical value system with the possibilities of the class struggle. In other words the conception of the radical value system does not articulate a strategy that would relate the issue of enhanced class identity with the prospect of socialism. This problem has become acute because the various parties with a radical value system have increasingly adapted to the interests of capitalism. Indeed Parkin recognises this problem. Consequently there is no substitute for the promotion of a strategy that would connect the importance of a radical value system with a sense of the importance of a conscious struggle for socialism. In other words there is no alternative to what Meszaros has called the socialist offensive if the capitalist system is to be challenged and its domination ended. However we lack a situation in which mass Marxist parties are articulating this demand and the class consciousness of the working class remains demoralised and people are unsure about the superiority of socialism when compared to capitalism.

We are back to the question about how this adverse situation can be transformed? Firstly, criticism of the limitations of the conception of the radical value system does not mean that we should neglect the task of promoting its virtues. Increasing support for a distinct working class identity would generate the prospect of class struggle. Hence Marxism does have an important role in the promotion of a radical value system. Secondly, these tasks cannot be realised without the construction of an action programme that would explain how the aims of class struggle could be attained in the present circumstances. Thirdly, theoretical objectives cannot be realised without the expression of the dynamism and creativity of the mass movement. If theory is nothing more than the articulation of the views of Marxism then the aims of the party lack the dynamics of practice. But, as Parkin explains, the establishment of a relationship between party and class can transform the situation: “Once established among the subordinate class, the radical mass party is able to provide its supporters with political cues, signals, and information of a very different kind from those made available by the dominant culture. To a considerable degree workers may look to their party for political guidance in the attempt to make sense of their social world. They themselves have relatively little access to knowledge, so that the political cues provided by their own mass party are of key importance to their general perception of events and issues.”(44)

If we ignore the element of elitism in the view of Parkin he is making a crucial point. The establishment of a principled relationship between party and class can transform the world view of the latter. The working class becomes receptive to ambitious objectives and the result of this situation is an immense increase in confidence and renewed acceptance of the aim of socialism. Popular support for the socialist offensive could become possible in this situation. However, we also must be aware that this development has not yet occurred and is unlikely to occur as long as Marxist organisations remain in crisis and without strategic vision. Furthermore, the creation of a relation between the class struggle and socialism is complicated by the present ability of the trade union leadership to undermine any prospect of militant struggle. In other words Marxism has to advance and the working class has to generate its own militant leadership if the limitations of the present are to be overcome. The depth of the crisis of Marxism and the uncontested ascendency of the domination of the trade union bureaucracy means that the development of principled alternatives will involve complex and intransigent struggle. The difficulties of the situation may mean that the system will continue to survive without being seriously contested.

CONCLUSION – RESOLVING THE CONTRADICTION BETWEEN SPONTANEITY AND ORGANISATION

The present political situation seems to be grim. On the one hand the influence of Marxist organisations that express what Parkin has defined as a radical value system is very small. These organisations are often in crisis. On the other hand the domination of the trade union bureaucracy over the working class means that struggles are generally defensive and so lack any sense of the objective of socialism. The crucial task is to establish a relationship between the Marxist organisation and the working class. One commentator quotes from Lenin and concludes: “Here it is quite clear that Lenin does not disparage the immediacy and unexpected nature of mass uprisings. Yet, he is the last one to bow to spontaneity alone, to give this chaotic force an absolute priority. Instead, while such events inevitably occur, they require consciousness from the Social Democrats, a consciousness that must respond to the degree of inexplicability of popular action. “Consciousness”…… betokens the awareness, planning and organization on which Lenin was so keen. But the text makes it clear that such organization should not be the sole emphasis. Both spontaneity and consciousness act together and dialectically, the latter called upon to anticipate and respond to the intensity of that elemental force: The greater the force of the latter, the greater must be the former.”(45)

The problem with this comment is not that it lacks merit but that it is no longer applicable. The present Marxist organisations are not adequate for carrying out complex political tasks and the working class is on the defensive and is generally unable to respond to the challenges posed by the austerity policy of the ruling class. Without Marxism the prospect of the development of a socialist perspective is small and without mass struggle the movement does not develop that could oppose the policy of the ruling class. In these circumstances the most progressive outcome would be the development of mass struggle that could inspire the Marxist groups to overcome their lethargy. Historical events have indicated the importance of spontaneity for changing the balance of class forces. This type of development could occur in the present. However this progress would not encourage complacency within the Marxist groups because it would become their task to encourage the advance of the capacity of the working class to create the new society. As Paul Mattick argues: “Organisations, in Luxemburg’s view, should merely help release the creative forces inherent in mass actions and should integrate themselves in the independent proletarian attempts to organise a new society. This approach presupposed not a clear, comprehending revolutionary consciousness but a highly developed working class, capable of discovering by its own efforts ways and means of utilising the productive apparatus and its own capacities for a socialist society.”(46)

Lenin’s standpoint assumes that the prospect for the acceptance of the leadership of the revolutionary party by the working class will generally occur because of the ultimate limitations of the spontaneous struggle. But this relationship is not what is needed in the present. Instead of the organisational superiority of the party in relation to the role of the working class what is actually required is that the mass movement accepts the socialist objectives of the party. It will then be up to the working class to define and invent what is meant by the objective of socialism. This process of clarification will occur simultaneously combined with the influence of the conscious struggle for socialism. Marxism has a crucial role to play in terms of promoting this process of generating popular support for socialism. However this means that the organisation of Marxism is not distinct from the spontaneous impulses of the working class and instead is an influence that connects spontaneity to the conscious aim of socialism. Marxism does not instruct the working class and is instead as Luxemburg would suggest it becomes the very expression and articulation of spontaneity. In contrast, the tendency was for the emergence of important organisations to undermine spontaneity: “Strong organisations, on the other hand, were inclined to disregard spontaneity. Their optimism was based on their own successes not on the probability of spontaneous movements coming to their aid at some later date. They advocated either that organised force must be defeated by organised force, or held to the view that the school of practical every-day activity as carried on by party and trade union would lead more and more workers to recognise the inescapable necessity of changing social relations. In the steady growth of their own organisations, they saw the development of proletarian class consciousness and at times they dreamed that these organisations would comprise the whole of the working class.”(47)

This trajectory is why the party often justified the stifling of the spontaneous dynamism of the working class in the name of the objective of socialism. Only the actual unity of party and class in 1917 contradicted this trend towards the domination of the class by party between 1914 and the present. The re-emergence of this type of relationship would be detrimental in relation to the tasks confronting the class struggle in the present. What is required is the encouragement of the spontaneous dynamism of the class struggle, and in this regard Marxism should advocate the strategic importance of the socialist offensive instead of justifying the organisational domination of the class by the party. In other words the traditional contrast between organisation and spontaneity is increasingly questionable because the limitations of organisation are an expression of a lack of connection to spontaneity and the problems with spontaneity are because of its subordination of conscious aims to the impulses of the elemental. However the resolution of these problems does not require the traditional justification of the subordination of the spontaneous to the role of the organisation. Instead in a unique Luxemburgian manner the role of Marxism should be to encourage the spontaneous impulses of the working class to generate its own tendency for organisational forms that promote the prospect of socialism. We have a situation in which the previous domineering role of the party has been rejected but an alternative has not yet emerged. The result of this unavoidable process of transition is that capitalism has been strengthened and it appears that the system cannot b challenged. Hence the vital role of Marxism is to provide arguments as to why capitalism does not represent the logic or purpose of history. This also means that the view that capitalism is a flawed system subject to crisis can be outlined and the reasons provided for an action programme can be justified. The point is not that success in these theoretical tasks will promote the re-emergence of effective class struggle, but the renewed theoretical importance of Marxism could be crucial to the generation of opposition to the austerity policy. Confidence in these terms does not mean justification for the rigid determinism of historical necessity but it does mean the rejection of the view that the capitalist class has won the class struggle. The enhancement of the reasons for class struggle is the most crucial task that Marxism can provide in the present period. Marxists cannot provide guarantees of success but it can provide reasons for resistance to the austerity policy of the ruling class. To some extent the class struggle has revived in countries like Greece and it is essential that this struggle is extended to the EU in general.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)R. Craig Nation: War On War, Haymarket Books, Chicago,2009 p20-25

(2)Editor Sean Matgamna: The Fate of the Russian Revolution, Phoenix Press, London, 1998 p159-215

(3)Leon Trotsky: The Third International After Lenin, Pathfinder Press, New York 1972

(4)E.H Carr: The Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935,Macmillan, London, 1982 p3-85

(5)Leon Trotsky: The Transitional Programme for Socialist Revolution, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1973

(6)Leon Trotsky: Revolution Betrayed, New Park, London 1973

(7)Matgamna, op cit p64-67

(8)ibid p135-139

 (9)Herbert Marcuse: One Dimensional Man, Routledge, London, 2002

(10)Serge Mallet: The New Working Class, Spokesman, Nottingham, 1975

(11)Ernest Mandel: Marxist Economic Theory, Merlin, London, 1968

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