HOPE FOR A BETTER WORLD

In the 2017 general election in the UK, the people voted in favour of hope for a better society. The ideology of continuing austerity and a hard BREXIT was increasingly rejected in favour of the promise promoted by the Labour Party leadership of improved public services, an end to tuition fees for university education, and greater equality and social justice. In contrast the Conservative campaign was based solely on the view that they were the most sensible party in order to carry out a BREXIT that people could support. This perspective was based on the supposed ability of Theresa May to negotiate with the EU. However, the Tories alienated the pensioners with their proposals on social care and the winter fuel allowance, and had no appeal to the young voters. In contrast, the Labour Party under Corbyn's leadership carried out a dynamic campaign, and its appeal was based on the view that society could be better than its current limitations. Corbyn argued that the Tories were the party of fear, but the Labour Party was about promoting an alternative based on the ideals of equality and social justice. The fact that this message was promoted with conviction and sincerity meant that it developed support. This dynamic campaign enabled the Labour Party to gain 29 seats, and its share of the vote was 40%. Corbyn has silenced his critics and the right wing will be unable to oppose his leadership for many years.

Marxists should have learnt three major lessons from this election. Firstly, it is possible to argue in favour of a left-wing platform and gain mass support. Secondly, it is also feasible for the left wing of the Labour Party to establish greater control and so transform the organisation into something that is suitable for the task of promoting socialism. Thirdly, we can improve the present message of hope so that it becomes a systematic promotion of the aim of socialism. Marxists have to outline how the present LP programme for the improvement of capitalism in terms of the principles of equality and social justice is not sufficient, and instead we can elaborate the arguments that represent the aims of socialism. The reason that this approach is required is not based on dogma, but is instead related to the recognition that the reform of capitalism is not sufficient in order to improve society. These reformist measures for change will not bring about the realisation of equality and social justice that is connected to the aspiration of the improvement of society. Instead a choice will be posed in terms of the effective regression of society towards the enhancement of the imperatives of capital, or else the overcoming of the limitations of the present policy in connection to advance towards socialism. This process of movement towards the realisation of a better type of society will be the most effective manner in which the hope of the LP manifesto can be realised.

In other words if a Labour government is elected in the near future on its present programme, the forces of capital and conservatism will attempt to undermine its realisation. Even the implementation of reforms that uphold the interests of working people will be considered to be intolerable to the supporters of the present economic system. Thus the Labour government will be presented with a choice, which is that of retreat or to defy the defenders of capitalism in terms of supporting movement towards socialism. However, if this choice is to become feasible it will be necessary for the Labour movement to become advocates of socialism in the present. The trade unions and Constituency Labour Parties should become the organisations that promote the importance of an alternative to capitalism. It should be made explicit that the implementation of the LP programme means that reforms become the basis for the realisation of a new socialist society. It will be argued by the right wing of the LP that this approach will alienate the many voters that are presently in favour of the reform of society, but would not promote what would amount to revolutionary change. Marxists would reply that the very ability to introduce reforms such as improving public services requires advance towards socialism. If we instead limit ourselves to the existing system the result will be retreat and acceptance of the limitations and restrictions represented by capitalism. Hence in order that the hope expressed by the popular support for the manifesto is not disappointed, we would suggest that reformist type change has to be transformed into the development of the process of transition from capitalism to socialism.

Critics of the above view would suggest that people have not voted in favour of socialism, but instead support the reformist type proposals in the Labour Party manifesto. This point is true, and it is why it is a crucial task of Marxists to make the arguments in favour of socialism. We would argue that it is not impossible to obtain mass support for socialism. Marxists have to outline why reforms are not sufficient, and instead the very introduction of reforms can only be successful if connected to the task of aiming to realise a better type of society. For example, the very modest aim of improving the NHS will be resisted by those that defend privilege and vested economic interests within society. Thus in order to obtain the possibility that such changes can effectively occur means that it is vital to advance towards socialism. This is because the establishment of the economic and political power of the working class will create more favourable conditions in which opposition to the reform measures of a Labour government can be undermined. But in order that this process of change is not undemocratic means that the LP should become open advocates of socialism. It should relate its policies to the ultimate aim of socialism. Instead at present the LP leadership defend their policies in terms of them being reasonable methods to reform capitalism. This standpoint represents the illusion that capitalism can be improved by the determination of a Labour government with mass support. What this viewpoint ignores is that the very continuation of capitalism will mean that the interests of working people will not be consistently realised. The forces of capital may be successful in opposing the modest reform proposals of the Labour government. What would be more effective and successful is the contrasting perspective of recognising that the ability to ensure that reforms are implemented is the process of change towards socialism. This is because if capitalism continues its forces are still powerful and so could undermine the attempt to realise reforms. In contrast if socialism is established the balance of class power has changed, and this means that the potential to introduce reforms becomes more practical and feasible.

There have been many examples in history of the problems of reformist governments because they did not recognise the importance of the forces of opposition and inertia. One indication of this situation was that of the 1945 Labour government. It could introduce limited nationalisations and the NHS because of mass support, but its ability to continue to improve society was undermined by the strength of the conservative forces within society. Ultimately the welfare state was made possible because of the role of the economic boom, and the acceptance by conservatives of this situation. But in the 1980's the conservative government considered the welfare state as a luxury that had to be undermined. Since this period the requirements of capital have been opposed to even the minor modification of the economic system in favour of working people. In this context the introduction of reforms is vehemently opposed by the forces of capital, and their political representatives in the various bourgeois parties. Consequently in order to try and ensure that reforms can be successfully implemented means that the economic and political power of capital is decreased within society. This aim can only have logic and be successful if it is connected to the attempt to introduce socialism, or replace the existing system with an alternative that represents the newly dominant power of the working class. In contrast, any Labour government will discover that the attempt to introduce its reforms will be opposed by the economic and political forces of capital. This process of conflict and contradiction will mean that in order for the reforms to be successfully implemented requires advance of the interests of working people towards socialism. The Labour government needs to have a programme and a strategy to promote the introduction of socialism.

It could be argued that the above perspective is unrealistic because the LP has never had a serious conception of the aim of socialism. The LP is instead a reformist party, and its ambitions are limited to improving capitalism. Furthermore, the working class, and society in general, has not supported socialism, and so its aspirations are limited to achieving moderate improvements within society. Both of these objections have been valid in the past. The LP has been dominated by a pragmatic right wing that is limited to supporting a programme of reforms, and under Tony Blair it became an open defender of capitalism and globalisation. But Jeremy Corbyn is the most left wing leader of the LP since Keir Hardie. He secretly does aspire to realise socialism, but also believes that this would be an unpopular perspective. The result of his conflicting view is that he and his leadership team advocate a radical programme of policies that would intend to introduce social justice and equality within society. Marxists can support these policies, but we would also suggest that if these proposed reforms are to be effectively implemented this development requires a process of change within society and the introduction of socialism. Thus we have to convince the LP and the labour movement in general that the capacity to realise improvements within society requires the introduction of socialism. The strength of our argument is that Corbyn secretly agrees with it. But his pessimistic instincts also mean that he emphasises the importance of developing social justice within existing society. In this context Marxists need to suggest that Corbyn's existing perspective is flawed, and instead socialism is the most feasible approach. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that we could obtain the support of a radicalised LP for our standpoint. But if we do not make this argument because we are pessimistic about its success then we can never know whether the LP can become advocates of socialism.

The other objection to our viewpoint is more powerful. It is true that the people of the UK have never effectively supported socialism. The perspective of socialism has always been a minority standpoint, and has essentially been advocated by Marxist groups, most importantly the Stalinist CPGB. The reformist influence within society has been shaped by the defensive character of the trade unions, and the most important ideology within society has often been that of conservatism. But the 2017 election has created the possibilities to transform this situation. Corbyn has effectively introduced the concept of hope, and this has acquired popular support. Hence the role of Marxists is to modify this standpoint of hope and relate it to the aim of socialism. We can maintain that hope can truly become meaningful when connected to the process of transition to a better type of society. In contrast, the expectations of hope may be undermined if they remain within the limitations of capitalism. The most effective and practical possibility for hope is when this aspiration is related to the aim of socialism. In contrast, the most important ideological alternative is represented by conservatism which advocates austerity, accommodation to nationalism, and the defence of the major companies as against the interests of working people. Hence this polarisation means that the aim of socialism could become popular. However, if this possibility is to be realised means that Marxists themselves have to reject the pessimism of their desperate activism and instead seriously make the argument in favour of socialism. In the last analysis the possibilities to realise a better future depends on the actions of Marxists. We have to outline the reasons why the LP and people in general, should support socialism. Only if this argument is made will it be possible for the next election to be conducted in terms of the relationship of the LP manifesto to the aim of socialism. But, if Marxists are unwilling to promote the alternative of socialism, it will be unlikely that the LP will be willing to connect its policies to a new type of society. This Marxists have a vital role in relation to the possibilities of the political future.

The above argument is connected to the question of the BREXIT negotiations. Calling a general election was not a reckless measure by Theresa May. She knows that the BREXIT negotiations cannot be successful in terms of the economic and political interests of British capitalism. May wanted the elections to establish an unassailable situation in which the Tories would be able to win an election in five years’ time despite the obvious failure of the BREXIT talks. The future is uncertain for a UK that is embarking on an isolationist attempt to realise its supposed freedom from the EU. In this situation the UK is confronted with the prospect of not being in the single market, or even customs union, and this could mean isolation and a tremendous decline in trade. No wonder the British capitalists are increasingly alarmed by this situation. Thus May had no other option than to call a general election in order to try and strengthen the position of the Tories in relation to the BREXIT negotiations. She knows that the results of BREXIT cannot be popular with large parts of the electorate. Therefore the party that has conducted the BREXIT negotiations will have the prospect of losing many seats in the any election that occurs in five years’ time. The only alternative for this possibility was a massive Tory majority in 2017. This approach failed because of the incredible LP revival. The Tories have been reduced to a minority government, and the LP is actually in a favourable situation because it in opposition whilst the BREXIT negotiations occur. But it is a mistake for the LP to support a hard BREXIT, such as withdrawal from the single market. Instead it would be principled to support a soft BREXIT which would combine acceptance of the referendum result together with the opinion of the REMAIN voters. There is nothing principled about supporting the Tory approach to the BREXIT negotiations. The LP should promote a policy of internationalism and socialism, which means upholding the right of free movement of labour and the international development of the economy. Hence the ambiguity, or silence on BREXIT should be ended, and instead the LP should differentiate itself from the Tories. Only in this manner can the LP unite both LEAVE and REMAIN voters in support of a distinctive approach to BREXIT.

The Tory government represents Bonapartism in crisis. It rules on behalf of capital, but it actually no longer has the confidence of the ruling class. Even the Democratic \Unionist Party is reluctant to support the Tories. Hence we have a genuine minority government which may be likely to lose many votes in the House of Commons. This precarious situation means that a new general election is forthcoming in the near future. The Tories would be reckless to replace Theresa May as leader despite the unfavourable result of the 2017 general election. She is by far their most capable leader, but who was badly advised about the contents of the Tory manifesto. Any replacements for her leadership such as Boris Johnson would be vastly inferior. Hence we have a genuine crisis of leadership in the Tory party. The LP must take advantage of this situation. It must be ready for an election in the next year or so. In order to win a general election the LP must elaborate its policy of hope. Marxists should advocate that this means the development of the aim of socialism. The very concept of hope should come to mean the aspiration for socialism. Indeed in this manner the aspiration of hope would no longer seem to be vague and indefinite and instead it will have been given extra meaning and sense of purpose. Marxists believe that the LP can actually increase its support given the superior qualities of socialism when contrasted to the vague promise of hope. The point is that hope is not definite and therefore must ultimately be superseded by a superior quality. This aspect is represented by socialism, this is hope translated into the aim of a definite society. In this context hope becomes something that is more emancipatory than capitalism, it becomes a new society. In other words hope cannot remain vague and indefinite it has to be made precise, and the most concrete that hope can become is to express the expectation of socialism.

It will be argued that socialism is a utopian aim, and so it is actually inferior to the qualities that represent the concept of hope. Hence hope means something better within capitalism and so it is superior to the supposed unreality of socialism. However, Marxists would dispute this view and instead outline the reason why hope is problematical unless it is connected to socialism. The attempt to connect hope to improvements within capitalism is uncertain and unstable. Thus the only manner in which hope can be established and made permanent is by the process of movement to socialism. In contrast, the attempt to realise hope within capitalism can often result in unrealised expectations and disillusionment. The principled character of hope is its role as an ideological concept of transition to socialism. Hope without this connection to socialism is eventually limited and flawed, or an aspiration that cannot be realised. In contrast, if hope is consciously connected to socialism it can have an ultimate purpose and end result. Socialism is also the only principled manner in which the political crisis of the Tory government can be resolved by the development of something that is higher and superior to the system defended by the Conservatives. Indeed, socialism was the implicit but secret message of the 2017 manifesto of the LP. But it was not openly advocated because socialism was considered by the LP leadership to be unpopular. We should reject this pessimistic view, and instead argue directly for socialism. It may be surprising how much support this approach may establish, but the validity of socialism is ultimately not based on its possible popularity instead it is the only alternative to the limitations of capitalism. In this context socialism is the hope of the future.

James Marshall of Labour Party Marxists, in an article entitled: 'Things Have just got better' argues that the 2017 Labour manifesto was modest and did not promise anything more ambitious than reforming capitalism. He maintains: “However......there is precious little that is genuinely leftwing about 'For the Many'. Certainly it has nothing whatsoever to do with genuine socialism.”(1) He outlines how the various measures in the manifesto are modest and based on the modification of capitalism rather than its transformation. What he ignores with this analysis is that the manifesto provided hope that a Labour government would act to realise the interests of working people and outlines a collection of measures that express this aspiration. In an organised form this vague hope for a better world can be defined as socialism. But Marshall does not suggest that the alternative to the limitations of the Labour manifesto is socialism. Instead he advocates a minimum programme that is based on the maximum that can be achieved under capitalism, such as establishing a federal republic, abolition of the monarchy, a massive programme of council house building, nationalisation of the banks and the key industries and democratisation of the EU as an alternative to BREXIT. The armed forces would be replaced with a popular militia. (2) We can support these policies, but they do not necessarily represent the process of transition to socialism. Indeed, Marshall provides no understanding of how anti-capitalist measures can only be realised in terms of the role of the mass mobilisation of the working class and the creation of popular organisations which express the democratic will of society. Only the elaboration of class consciousness and the radicalisation of society can generate the possibility to achieve any sort of meaningful change. This development will not occur in terms of the role of a limited anti-capitalist programme but instead by creating real support for a socialist alternative to capitalism. This prospect is possible because people have increasingly voted for Corbyn because they want a different and better type of society. We can provide a name for their expectations which is socialism. The definite character of the hope that led to support for the Labour party can be translated into the aim of socialism. Increasingly people no longer want austerity, or accept low wages and poor working conditions, instead they are supporting an alternative for what exists. The Labour Party is becoming popular because it symbolises this aspiration for a new type of society.

In other words the problem with the views in Marshall’s article is that he does not recognise the possibilities created by the election. He is content to analyse events in terms of the views he has developed in the past. Thus his emphasis is on the importance of democracy within the Labour party rather than trying to connect the massive popular vote for Corbyn with the aim of socialism. Therefore his perspective still seems to be distant and unrealisable. But we have to reject the limitations of views formed in the past. The minimum programmes of yesterday have to be recognised as being out of date. What is required is the importance of connecting our views to the aspiration for change. The character of this process of radicalisation is defined by socialism. This means it is not academic and impractical to debate what we mean by socialism. What is the most attractive form of socialism that we can present to the people? This is the message that should be learnt from the recent general election. Hence it is not sufficient to be content with defining socialism in terms of antiquated dogmas or repetition of the views of Marx or Lenin. Rather we should be imaginative and in this manner be able to connect our aims in a relevant manner to the expectations of the people. Marxists should understand that at the recent general election people in a sense voted for socialism but without being able to provide a name or definition for this aspiration. The hope of the people was a vague mood that only acquires precise meaning and content in terms of the elaboration of socialism. Thus it is possible to connect this hope with the theoretical justification of socialism. Marshall is reluctant to carry out this task because he can only define socialism in the following brief and inadequate terms: “For orthodox Marxism, as everyone knows, socialism begins with a fundamental break with capitalism – socialism being the role of the working class and the transition to a classless, stateless, and moneyless society.”(3) This justification of dogma as the basis of the character of socialism denies the importance of what socialism may mean in the era of advanced capitalism such as the importance of connecting the role of production with consumption. But Marshall only outlines his definition of socialism in terms of avoiding its actual importance. He does not think that the issue of socialism has been raised by the general election. Instead to him, socialism is a distant issue, with little practical and immediate importance. He could not be more wrong. Instead the electorate has raised hope that the LP can bring about a better world. Marxists have to outline how this aspiration can only be realised in terms of the establishment of a socialist society.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)James Marshall: Things Have Just Got Better, in Weekly Worker, June 15th 2017, number 1159 p6

(2) ibid p6

(3) ibid p6