IS THE LABOUR PARTY FINISHED?

The recent by-election victory of the Labour party in Stoke indicates that the view that its demise is imminent has proved to be premature. However, the victory of the Tories in Cumbria also shows that the situation is serious, and the Conservatives are likely to win the next general election. They have been able to take advantage of being the government that implements BREXIT, and therefore is able to express the role of popular nationalism or right wing populism. The Labour Party has no answer to this standpoint, and is instead uncertain about its response to the BREXIT bill concerning the UK ending its connections to the EU. Corbyn tries to concentrate attention on the situation in the NHS, but he is only partially successful in this task, and instead people prefer to support the view of the government that it is doing everything it can to improve the situation in the hospitals. The long-term problem for the Labour party is that it has dramatically declined in Scotland, and so its possibility to win general elections no longer exists. In this situation the pressure grows to realise an alliance with the Scottish National Party that would improve its chances of victory in the next general election.

The apparently dire situation of the Labour Party has led left wing supporters to become increasingly critical of the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. But he is not to blame for a situation in which the legacy of the Blair administration was to alienate many Labour supporters from the party. The result of this situation is that the popular base of the party has shrunk, and Corbyn was faced with the problem of popular nationalism in relation to the EU referendum. His critics seem to suggest that he could do miracles in order to achieve a victory for the Remain camp. In actuality he could do little to challenge the surge of support for a 'Leave' standpoint, and so his intervention on behalf of the Remain campaign was bound to be ineffective. The point is that no individual leader of the Labour party could alter this situation and undermine the strength of popular nationalism. Furthermore, the Tory government are able to take advantage and so represent themselves as the expression of the national will in terms of promoting a 'hard' BREXIT. Their intransigent stance has led to the consolidation of their dominant position within British politics and this results in the continued undermining of the position of the Labour Party.

In other words, Corbyn has become leader of the Labour Party in an unfavourable situation and he is not able to improve its chances by imaginative development of strategy. Instead he has tried to accommodate to right wing views in terms of compromises about immigration and nuclear power and diluted opposition to the process of exit from the EU. The ultimate problem that he has is that the mass basis of support for the Labour Party is continually diminishing and instead the Tories have become more popular because of their accommodation to nationalism. In this context Corbyn lacks a strategy to try and transform this unfavourable situation. Instead he advocates in a desperate manner that the Labour party should be activist and listen to the concerns of the people. However, this standpoint does not address the problem of the influence of popular nationalism and populism within the working class. Primarily he is not prepared to make the argument for genuine internationalism as an alternative, and instead outlines the traditional Labour emphasis on the reform of society. This approach is not able to challenge the emotional strength of popular nationalism and its enduring appeal within society. Indeed it could be argued that the Labour Party, which has been based on the importance of the national state, accommodation to the monarchy, and acceptance of the interests of British capital within the world economy, is not able to provide an alternative to the role of popular nationalism. However, until such an alternative is establish the situation is favourable for the continued victory of the Tories in the general elections. This development would challenge the legitimacy of the Labour Party and so question its continued validity.

But in order to promote the influence of internationalism within the Labour Party requires the influence of Marxism. But this approach is also in crisis because of an effective accommodation to the role of popular nationalism. In the name of the interests of the working class, the Socialist Party and SWP adopted a Leave standpoint in the EU referendum, and so tried to deny the importance of the sentiment of popular nationalism. This meant they also denied the influence of this standpoint on their own politics, and instead tried to consider the successful Leave vote as an expression of the will of the working class. This conciliation of national chauvinism meant that these parties have become disorientated and unable to promote internationalism in a principled manner. Only Left Unity and Red Flag adopted any semblance of internationalism in relation to the referendum. Hence there is an effective crisis within the supposed forces of Marxism, which means they are unable to exert any effective pressure on the Labour Party. This situation is reinforced by the bureaucratic degeneration of Momentum which is no longer a democratic organisation or expression of the process of radicalisation within the Labour Party. Hence the ability to oppose the forces of right wing popular nationalism within society is weak, and this means the pressures for the Labour party to adapt to these reactionary developments only increases.

In this situation the logic is for the LP to try and transform the situation in terms of an alliance with the SNP. However, this coalition could only be implemented in terms of acceptance by the LP that it would no longer contest major elections in Scotland. The LP would be reduced to a party of England and Wales. This standpoint would represent an act of folly because the domination of nationalism in Scotland could be temporary because nationalist politics cannot resolve the important social problems in this country. Instead we should call on the left wing of the SNP to strive to achieve domination of that organisation in order to transform this organisation into a genuine socialist party. On this basis an alliance with the LP would acquire principled aspects. The point is that the SNP as presently constituted is a liberal type party which is committed to progressive capitalism within the EU. Its ideology is nationalism and so is opposed to the internationalism which is vital if the Conservatives are to be effectively defeated. The aim of the political separation of Scotland cannot advance the possibility to defeat the Conservatives. Indeed, the Tories have become the second most popular party in Scotland. The SNP is also likely in its present form to be indifferent to the plight of the LP. It would only become amenable to the prospect of an alliance with the LP when its ideology has become similar to that of socialism. This development would require the transformation of the SNP into a workers' party. In this context the aim of a socialist Scotland could be advanced. The political conditions would be advanced to defeat the influence of popular nationalism within the UK.

In relation to the future of the LP its demise is unlikely to happen because it has important traditions and roots within British society. The link with the trade unions is very important. But what has also to be emphasised is that the Tories seem to have become omnipotent because of their close relation to the forces that promote BREXIT. The Tories seem to have sacrificed the relationship of the UK to globalisation in order to uphold its own political supremacy. In this manner they seemed to have become indifferent to the continuation of links with the single market of the EU, and instead are deliberately promoting an isolationist policy. This threatens the possibility of major crisis because 60% of the trade of the UK is with the EU. It will not be able to sustain this situation in a regime of high tariffs and the effective demise of consistent trade between the UK and the EU. Hence the importance of popular nationalism is likely to be undermined in this situation of economic crisis and increased unemployment. The point is will the LP be able to establish its leadership in these conditions? If the right wing has succeeded in overthrowing the Corbyn regime they will not have an effective policy to address the crisis of British capitalism. They will be unable to provide an alternative to the end of the relationship of the UK to the single market of the EU. Their strategy has been based on the continuation of the connection of the UK to the EU, which is why Blair has rejected the result of the referendum. The point is that the only policy that will have any credibility given the contradictions caused by the UK's exit from the EU will be that of internationalism. A left wing government would attempt to establish economic and political relations with the countries of the world. It would seek to end the problems of isolationism with the perspective of re-connecting the global economy with that of the UK.

But if the LP is not under left-wing leadership, and instead is based on the ineffectiveness of the right-wing, the situation will be conducive for the Tories to establish more authoritarian forms of rule. The very possibility of the end of bourgeois democracy would be posed. This would be the logical result of popular nationalism. In other words because popular nationalism is in contradiction with the logic of economic prosperity, the only outcome of its influence can be increasing autarky and isolation. This situation can only create immense problems for an economy that has been used to a relationship with the world economy, via the role of the EU. Hence in order to try and politically resolve a serious economic crisis would require the establishment of authoritarian forms of government. The Tories are already creating the possibility for this development in terms of their emphasis on the importance of the popular will. This reactionary process is only encouraged by the weakness of the LP and the limitations of the Marxist left. The trade unions are also on the defensive and so will not be able to withstand the establishment of a dictatorship. Obviously, this process is only at its beginning given the continued popularity of the Tories and the fact that the implications of BREXT are not yet apparent. Remember the UK is still a part of the EU, and will not be negotiating for separation until March 2017.

But the prospects for the future are serious. In this context the most effective basis to maintain parliamentary government is to promote the realisation of a strong Labour administration. Hence, in a perceptive manner Corbyn is right to suggest that the alternatives are between a policy of fear or hope. But the point is that we have to transform this sound-bite into a strategy to oppose the forces of isolation, reaction and populism. This means that the accommodation to popular nationalism in the approach of the LP has to be rejected and instead genuine internationalism established. This means support for the development of solidarity between the people of the world and the continued membership of the single market by the UK. The point is that the people of the UK have not voted for leaving the single market. We should advocate a progressive relationship with the EU based on close economic and political ties. This also means the right of EU citizens to emigrate to the UK. In order to for this demand to become genuinely popular we should strive to promote the solidarity of the working class and an end to the influence of national chauvinism. This means all work should be based on a minimum wage of 15 pounds per hour. This development would end the influence of the view that emigration results in low wages and adverse working conditions. We should also strive to improve education and build more houses. The competition for resources has been because of the stringent priorities of the Tories, and the undermining of local and national public services. A left wing Labour government could reject the rigid policies of the Tories.

But how do we get a left wing Labour government elected? Remember a genuine left wing government has never been elected in the UK. Furthermore, this prospect is also undermined by the domination of the situation in Scotland by the SNP. Also the serious consequences of the isolation of the UK within the world economy would mean that the very demise of bourgeois democracy becomes a possibility. In that situation the issue becomes the struggle to establish a popular revolutionary government based on the role of mass organisations. But in the present the most important problem concerns tackling the reactionary role of popular nationalism. It is this development which establishes the credibility of the Tories despite their increasingly reckless economic stance. The Tories are prepared to reject globalisation in order to uphold a mass political base. This means that they effectively repudiate their close economic relationship to the capitalist class and the importance of world trade. This Bonapartism is highly unstable and can only be sustained by movement towards more authoritarian government or the establishment of alternative economic connections that replace the role of the EU. It is this latter policy that represents the hopes of the Tories, but it is very uncertain, and even if partially successful cannot replace the role of the EU for the UK. Consequently the prospect of failure, and the possibility of an end to the mass support for the Tories, means the imposition of authoritarian government becomes a viable option. This government could still retain its legitimacy if it retained the support of popular nationalism. Hence this is the issue to be resolved in a progressive manner by the Labour movement.

On the pessimistic side, popular nationalism has always been stronger than internationalism. This is partially because of the strength of the state institutions of the UK like the monarchy and the central government, and also because of the nationalist inclinations of the labour movement. The LP has always attempted to establish its credentials in terms of the supposed national interest, and it has supported the utilisation of the existing state in order to promote its economic policies. In this context the ideological importance of internationalism has been limited to the role of Marxist organisations. But even in this context it has been increasing defined in terms of solidarity and compassion with the peoples of the world rather than being understood as a process of revolutionary transformation. However, even this internationalism has been compromised and distorted by the adaptation of some of the Marxist left to the aims of the Leave Campaign in relation to the EU referendum. Hence genuine internationalism has become very marginal and increasingly an historical expression of the aims of Lenin's Communist International. Thus if we are to oppose popular nationalism with internationalism we have to re-discover what that means. Primarily it means showing that: “Thus, the real issue is not nationalism or internationalism, but what kind of nationalism or internationalism can – together advance the cause of socialist emancipation. For the dialectic of their interrelations makes it impossible to fill with content the demand for socialist internationalism without taking care of the vital needs of the national working classes; and vice versa, the pursuit of nationalistic objectives at the expense of other peoples can only generate (ultimately self-destructive) antagonisms, even if its immediate results tend to be favourable to the forces that embark on such ventures.”(1)

In other words the standpoint of internationalism is not indifferent to genuine national class objectives, but the very criteria by which this aspect is understood as principled means that the international aims of class unity are not compromised by the emphasis on the national. In contrast, popular nationalism is ultimately subservient to the interests of the bourgeoisie because this creed maintains the subordination of the working class to the aims of capitalism. This point would seem to be paradoxical because the expression of popular nationalism in relation to the EU referendum was against the interests of the capitalists and globalisation. However, popular nationalism did not advocate a genuine socialist alternative to the EU and so implied that the aspiration was for an isolationist capitalism within an autarkic UK state. The LP did not propose a principled alternative to this popular nationalism, and instead its standpoint was effectively that of the capitalist, or for a bourgeois concept of Remain within the EU. There was no popular political struggle in favour of a European United Socialist state. Thus Peter Hain explicitly outlines the importance of the UK membership of the EU in terms of the interests of British capitalism: “On trade we live in a global marketplace. Opening it up further depends on our clout in world trade negotiations: only the EU collectively has that clout. And only the EU has the clout to protect Britain's own interests when the exporters meet unfair competition.”(2)

Hence the choice at the time of the EU referendum was between alienated popular nationalism and the economic interests of British capitalism. Genuine internationalism was totally marginalised. Indeed most people did not know what it meant. But if the LP is to be elected to government in the future it has to re-discover internationalism and connect it to the interests of the working class. This process does not mean conciliating popular nationalism but instead rejecting it and showing that it represents the standpoint of the forces of reaction. The point is that whilst popular nationalism is not identical to bourgeois nationalism, in that the former is distrustful of the advantages of being in the world economy, it still is not able to express an alternative to the rule of capital. Only genuine internationalism is connected to socialism. But Jeremy Corbyn proposes a policy of state capitalism which is presided over by the bourgeois state. This means he cannot uphold either principled socialism or intransigent internationalism. Nor is he likely to become an advocate of this revolutionary perspective because of his relationship to the LP. This is why the role of Marxism is vital if internationalism is to become important within the LP.

The discontent with Jeremy Corbyn is limited at the moment because his critics are waiting for a dismal general election performance in order to call for his dismissal. The critics are undermined by the fact that Corbyn has won two leadership contests and he is presently popular with the rank and file of the LP. However, he has not obtained acceptance of a left-wing platform, partially because he has been reticent to outline his policies. Instead his standpoint is reduced to the slogan of support for the politics of hope instead of fear. He needs to outline what he means by hope and attempt to articulate it so that his supporters and the wider public know what is that he advocates. However, Marxists should utilise this opportunity to outline what we mean by hope. The following represents a brief list of what we mean by hope:

(1)The view that human activity does not have to be restricted to the imperatives of economic laws, and instead the principles of creativity, co-operation and solidarity can express the possibility to construct a society based on equality and the interests of working people.

(2)The improvement of the National Health Service and the other public services, so that they realise more effectively the needs of the people. This means the end of cuts to local authority finances, and instead central government should provide the resources that are required in order to meet the needs of localities. The Budget should be based on the interests of the people instead of the aims of austerity.

(3)Popular opposition to Tory rule and support for the creation of a mass movement in order to realise the formation of a Labour government that is accountable to the organisations of working people.

(4)The policy of soft BREXIT which would mean continued membership of the single market by the UK and the right of migration by EU citizens.

(5)Development of the perspective of control of the economy by working people. This would involve the aim of ending of the dominant power of multinationals and banks in terms of nationalisation and the establishment of a planned economy based on the principle of popular participation.

(6)The introduction of a Constitution, or Bill of Rights. This would involve a referendum on the continuation of the monarchy and House of Lords. The rights of minorities would be upheld by the Constitution, and religious diversity would be supported. But secular law, established by the legislative authorities, would have sole legitimacy. Equal rights for women would be advanced in all spheres of activity.

(7)The introduction of a minimum wage of 15 pounds per hour.

(8)The promotion of a skill based economy, and the most unpleasant tasks would be tackled by voluntary activity. This also means the development of generalised training for apprentices.

(9)The restoration of free university education, and the encouragement of the participation of the working class. The improvement of the overall education system and the greater encouragement of the reading of books and the learning of philosophy and history.

(10)Promotion of the aim of socialism in international terms. This means development of a foreign policy based on solidarity with the interests of humanity and the end to oppression and poverty.

(11)The acceptance of the principles of democracy and of the results of free elections.

If social activity was based on these rights and principles, the continuation of a society based on the privileges of class and the exploitation of labour would be undermined. The present situation could be transformed by the promotion of principles that represent egalitarianism and the concerted attempt to realise the possibility of a classless society. However, this collection of demands could only be realised if they acquire mass popularity. This means that the struggle to develop support for these demands requires that the LP, trade unions, and Marxists begin to seriously attempt to act to promote these policies within the working class and wider society. It will be argued that these policies are unrealistic, or over-ambitious. But we start from the understanding that the attempt to reform capitalism by the LP has been a historic failure. Instead over the last 50 years, the forces of Conservatism, and the right-wing of the LP, has sought to enhance the power of capital over labour. This situation has resulted in mass unemployment, low wages, poverty and austerity. The balance of power has decisively shifted in favour of capital and against labour. This has meant the welfare state has been seriously undermined, and the mixed economy has been replaced with the situation of privatisation and the demise of effective public services. These developments have also led to the decline of the trade unions and their growing inability to defend the interests of working people. Hence the programme of reformism has been discredited, and needs to be replaced with a more revolutionary response to the increasing power of the forces of capital. Unfortunately this possibility has been undermined by the influence of popular nationalism which has led to the blaming of migrants for the worsening of social conditions. The result of this situation was the vote in favour of BREXIT.

The BREXIT vote has led to the populist evolution of the Conservatives. They are prepared to reject any attempt to retain membership of the single market in order to promote an isolationist and autarkic UK. This situation could result in a massive increase in unemployment because the trading links of the UK with the EU would be ended. In order to retain power the Conservatives would be inclined to support the formation of authoritarian government. They would rule on the basis of the most extreme nationalism and the intensification of the exploitation of labour. The LP would be unprepared for this development unless it adopts a left wing programme that attempts to regain its support within the working class. In this context Corbyn's slogan of support for the politics of 'Hope instead of Fear' would become appropriate. But the right wing of the LP would be likely to capitulate to the repressive regime of the Tories. It would be necessary for the left wing to break with the right wing if the task of overthrowing an authoritarian regime was to be realised. However, the immediate problem is that Corbyn lacks an accessible policy that could begin to re-connect with dis-affected Labour voters. We suggest that the above 11 point programme could initiate the process of promoting the popularity of the LP. This task is not just about winning a general election, but is instead about resisting the drift towards the formation of a repressive regime and about advancing the possibility of socialism. The indecision and vacillation of the LP leadership undermines the future success of this task. Hence we advocate that the LP membership, and other left-wing groups adopt the above 11 policies in order to start the process of struggling to realise a Labour government. This government could be more than a classical reformist formation. Instead it could represent the beginning of a revolutionary process that results in the advance of socialism within the UK and internationally. The alternative is the possible reactionary victory of right wing populism and the creation of an isolationist society that undermines the living standards of working people. Only socialism and internationalism is a progressive alternative to this prospect.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Istvan Meszaros: The Power of Ideology, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Sussex 1989 p362-363
2. Peter Hain: Back to the Future of Socialism, Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2015 p211