A Critique of Lenin’s What Is To Be Done part one

Lars T. Lih has elaborated a commentary of Lenin’s What Is To Be Done (WITBD) entitled ‘Lenin Rediscovered’( Haymarket Books Chicago 2008) He argues that the traditional textual view that Lenin is justifying a pessimistic conception of the role of working class consciousness is mistaken. Instead Lenin has the utmost confidence in the capacity of the working class to become revolutionary but the important problem is the lack of organisational cohesion of the forces of Social Democracy. The working class is ready to engage in struggle against the autocracy but Social Democracy has not created a centralised party and national newspaper that can provide leadership. The model for his approach is provided by German Social Democracy that has become the tribune of the people and has developed a profound relationship between party and class. However academics have utilised various controversial phases in Lenin’s argument in order to suggest he dismisses the importance of working class struggle and instead reduces revolution to the level of a conspiracy that should be organised by an elite party. This is a caricature of his views because his major concern is to connect the role of a party with mass struggle in order to establish the political conditions for the overthrow of the autocracy.

Lih contends: “My argument is, rather, that when we grasp Lenin’s polemical aims, we discover that he is affirming something rather banal and non-controversial for Social Democrats. He is affirming the mission of Social democracy to bring the socialist message to the workers as vigorously as possible.”(p615) The Erfurt model of German Social Democracy has promoted the perspective that social transformation is only possible if there is a merger between the working class movement and the doctrine of socialism. The working class without the guidance of socialism can struggle against the employers for the right to form trade unions but the dynamics of this elemental resistance is not to establish a conscious understanding of the aim of socialism. Instead the result will be trade union politics that has a tendency to accommodate to bourgeois ideology. This was the understanding of both the German Social Democrats and the émigré forces that opposed the economistic view that economic struggle would realise political dynamics. Lenin is not saying anything new with this argument. One of the problems in this process of interpretation has been with translation and the word spontaneity has had more dynamic connotations than the actual Russian word that Lenin used which was stikhiinyi that refers to the role of elementary protest. Hence Lenin is not opposed to the importance of spontaneity rather he is critical of all those that accommodate to the elementary level of the class struggle and who are reluctant to advocate proposals that would facilitate the advance of this struggle to a higher level.

Lih argues to Lenin the economist trend prefers to reduce the importance of the class struggle to its elementary forms and so denies the importance of Social Democratic leadership of the working class. This is why the references to the word stikhiinyi are generally in relation to the limitations of natural or elemental class struggle and why uncritical attitudes towards this type of struggle ignore the importance of political leadership. The point is not that strikhiinyi does not have potential but that this potential will be realised by its merger with the role of Social Democracy. In contrast the Economist trend is underestimating the importance of this prospect because of an uncritical attitude towards strikhiinyi. Lenin is not arguing in terms of an absolute contrast between Social Democracy and the working class movement, rather he is arguing that left to itself the logic of mass struggle will not necessarily result in a fusion between party and class. Hence the party has to carry out a conscious struggle in order to develop a relationship with the class. This is the meaning of the controversial word divert. The point is not that he is underestimating the importance and potential of the stikhiinyi of the working class but rather he is suggesting that this potential will not become Social Democratic in a mechanical and automatic manner. Instead ideological struggle will be important in order to establish a relationship with the working class. This is why the fatalism of the economist trend must be rejected: “In other words the Social Democrats can make a difference.”(p630) Consequently he is not trying to make an elitist contrast between the party and class but instead arguing that with determination and conscious struggle the party can relate to the potential of the stikhiinyi movement. The alternative of the economists is an acceptance of a type of objectivism that argues the relationship of party and class will inevitably occur. This view is an underestimation of the tasks of the party.

Lenin did not establish any innovations when he argued that socialism is a doctrine brought to the working class from without. He was only using the authority of Kautsky in order to strengthen his point. His standpoint is not a pessimistic view that the working class is not receptive to the message of socialism. This is the orthodox academic viewpoint but it is wrong. In fact the working class was very receptive concerning socialism but the problem was the lack of organisation of Social Democracy which undermined the prospect of advancing the socialist message within the working class. The potential for the working class to become socialist was present in the Russia of the 1890’s but this potential was not realised because of the organisational limitations of Social Democracy. Hence the phrase about transmitting the socialist message from without is not about the political limitations of the working class and instead narrowly refers to the origins and development of socialist theory. Lenin is not arguing that the working class is incapable of socialist awareness but rather that in the period of the infancy of the class struggle it is not to be expected that the working class will become socialist and so the impetus for the influence of socialism originates from without the working class. This view is reinforced by reference to the works of Kautsky which may give a misleading impression of what Lenin is trying to argue. The point is that the working class will be receptive to the message of socialism and the differentiation between socialism and the working class can be ended by the establishment of a relationship between socialism and the working class. This task is recognised by Marxists but underestimated by the economists: “The ‘from without’ formula only makes sense within the framework of the merger narrative, which informs us that socialism and the worker movement are originally exterior to each other and have to be brought to each other. ‘Modern socialism’ that is, Marx’s scientific socialism – corrects the one-sidedness and isolation of both sides. It brings the message of socialism to the workers movement ‘from without’ but it also brings the message of class struggle and the need for a militant worker movement to the original workers movement ‘from without’(p649).

The reference to the importance of bourgeois intellectuals in developing the doctrine of socialism only obscures the point being made that socialism comes from without. Lenin is aware that working class intellectuals also participated in the development of socialism. Furthermore the phrase from without is not meant to argue that the intellectuals are the most receptive to the socialist message or that the working class can only develop socialist consciousness with the utmost difficulty. Instead he is suggesting that the possibility for the merger of socialist ideas that originate from without the class struggle with the mass movement of the workers is favourable and feasible. It is in this context that we can understand his references to the necessity to challenge the limitations of the consciousness generated by the class struggle. Lenin is not trying to argue that the working class is not favourably disposed towards socialism and he is not trying to reject the importance of trade union struggle. What he is trying to suggest is that the ideology generated by trade unionism is not socialist and so is bourgeois. Hence the task is to develop Social Democratic leadership of the trade union struggle and so undermine the ideology that argues the working class should limit itself to trade union reforms. This view is an argument against the economist standpoint that the working class can by itself and by the momentum of its struggle establish an ideology that is compatible with socialism: “A worker movement that is without Social Democratic influence is, by definition, one that sees no need for an independent class political party devoted to socialism….The development of a workers movement in which no one makes the case for Social Democracy will not be in he direction of Social Democracy……You must think that Social Democracy has no responsibility to try and convert a non-Social Democratic movement into a Social Democratic one.” (p665-666). Lenin is not arguing that the working class is inherently reactionary, rather he is trying to suggest what happens when the development of the trade union movement lacks the influence of Social Democracy. The result is a trade union ideology that accommodates to the limitations of capitalism. The task is to struggle to influence the trade unions in a social democratic manner.

Lih has helped to clarify Lenin’s meaning in relation to the controversial passages in WITBD. He has shown that Lenin is an optimist and not a pessimist. He has also outlined how Lenin’s major concern was to realise an interaction between Marxism and the class struggle and so he was confident that such a relationship could be established and result in the overthrow of the autocracy. However since the time of Lenin the situation has been complicated by the ascendency of Stalinism and the connected undermining of what can be considered to be principled Marxism. The forces of principled Marxism have become marginal and so the very issue of what constitutes revolutionary Marxism has become complicated. The division within the working class movement is no longer between the forces of social reform and revolution. Furthermore the very role of trade unionism has been undermined by the offensive of capital against labour and it would seem that capitalism has obtained a powerful ideological hegemony in the doctrine of there is no alternative. This situation has been complicated even more by the demise of Stalinism and the apparent discrediting of socialism. In this context Marxism has become a peripheral doctrine and workers are apparently no longer receptive to its message. The original division between socialism on the one hand and the class struggle on the other seems to being repeated in new historical conditions. Hence the question is to what extent can WITBD be relevant in these new historical circumstances?

 Lars T Lih is not interested in these issues because his major concern is with carrying out an academic exercise concerning challenging the various dogmatic interpretations of WITBD. He convincingly indicates that it is an orthodox work that is compatible with the standpoint of Kautsky and German Social Democracy. Lenin has established a task which is how Russian Social Democracy can become as popular and influential as German Social Democracy. His answer is that Russian Social Democracy should become the leadership of popular revolution against the autocracy. This means that the phase the economic struggle will become the political struggle is inadequate. It is necessary to recognise that the economic struggle in and of itself has a tendency to become limited by trade unionism and so becomes content by reforms. In contrast the struggle against the autocracy is a revolutionary struggle and therefore requires the intervention of Social Democracy. This intervention will facilitate the transformation of the consciousness of the working class from one that is based on trade union reforms into support for the overthrow of the autocracy. In order to facilitate this process the Social Democratic party will act as the tribune of the people and bring over the importance of all the various injustices of Tsarist society. Hence the working class will become capable of acting on behalf of all those suffering from oppression and so will act as the leader of a popular revolution against autocracy. Lars T Lih outlines the importance of this point very powerfully and suggests it has not been understood by the various commentators on Lenin because of their concern with his apparent elitism. Their preoccupation with Lenin’s emphasis on the importance of a centralised and elitist party glosses over his affinity with the model of German Social Democracy and how it has become the focus of revolutionary struggle against reaction. Lenin’s aim is to emulate the advances of the struggle in Germany. However the doctrine of economism represents an underestimation of the role of Social Democracy. It is based on a neglect of political tasks and the acceptance of the elemental limitations of the class struggle of the workers movement. Lenin criticises this doctrine which he believes is undermining the ability of the working class to become the leadership of popular revolution against autocracy. In other words Lih has articulated with great erudition that Lenin’s criticism of economism is from the standpoint of the revolutionary capacity of the working class. The attempt to portray him as a pessimist is a caricature of the approach outlined in relation to the tasks of popular revolution.

WITBD Chapter One

Lars T Lih argues that Lenin sometimes misrepresents the doctrines of the economists and he tries to caricature their arguments. This may be true. Lenin is noted for his polemical zeal and his tendency to justify one-sidedness. However Lenin is explicit about the most important issues involved in the dispute between the activists in Russia and the émigrés grouped around the journal Iskra. He argues that the central issue of contention is that whilst Iskra supports a revolutionary standpoint the Economists in Russia defend the followers of Bernstein and the perspective of social reform. This defence is carried out in the name of freedom of criticism and of the right of different trends to exist within the Marxist party. Lenin does not dispute the importance of political democracy but he argues that the Marxist party will become a party of social reform if it neglects the tasks of ideological struggle against the supporters of reform. He is actually making the point that the organisational forms of the revolutionary party may be complex but it cannot relax vigilance in relation to ideological tasks. Hence if the supporters of social reform were to be accepted without criticism the political character of the party would be compromised. In other words the central point of demarcation is between the advocates of reform and revolution.

This demarcation outlined by Lenin is also important in the contemporary context. However this issue is also complicated by the fact that some of the parties that historically could have been described as reformist are no longer reformist and instead uncritically accept capitalism without any need for substantial improvement. On the other hand some of the parties that claim to be revolutionary are actually reformist and do not argue for a revolutionary strategy. Hence the ideological tasks have become complex and this means that the resort to simplistic arguments is not sufficient. Indeed one of our major tasks will be to try and convert the most left-wing reformist forces into becoming supporters of the revolutionary standpoint. In other words the political situation cannot be reduced to differences between right-wing defenders of reforms and the supporters of revolution. This does not mean that the differences between reform and revolution have become so fluid that to the extent that these differences are virtually insignificant. On the contrary we have to continually define what we mean by revolution in order to understand the standpoint of reform. However during the time of Lenin it was relatively simple to identify the supporters of reform because they had rejected the importance of class struggle and advocated coalition governments with the forces of the capitalist class. These clear cut demarcations have become more complex because it is possible to argue that some parties that define themselves in explicitly Marxist terms are actually reformist.

This point can be elaborated in terms of understanding the political reaction to the austerity measures of the various European governments in relation to the attempt to tackle the economic crisis. The consistently revolutionary position would argue that only an alternative society – communism – can resolve the economic crisis. Hence the introduction of reforms that would make society fairer and equal is considered to be an illusion. However some of the forces that consider themselves revolutionary would argue that the development of militant struggle can create a situation in which the various governments would rethink the attempt to introduce austerity measures and instead act to resolve the crisis in a more progressive manner. The political implications of this standpoint are that the importance of the immediate is given priority and differentiated from the long term aim concerning the realisation of the future society. In other words what is important is the emphasis on the attainment of reforms and the ultimate aim of communism is considered to be abstract and unimportant. This perspective is the result of adapting to the illusions of the mass movement and the related failure to provide revolutionary leadership. However, formally the perspective of revolution and the aim of communism is not repudiated. The process of adapting to the latest form of reformism is obscured by the utilisation of orthodox Marxist terminology and the emphasis given to the Marxist conception of economic crisis. Hence the advocates of this standpoint would reject any suggestion of class compromise and instead would argue their approach in terms of the importance of class struggle. Consequently they would vehemently deny any suggestion that they have adopted a reformist standpoint. But they have accepted an important aspect of reformism in terms of the differentiation between short-term aims, which are considered obtainable, from the ultimate aim of communism and its apparently distant and irrelevant character. This standpoint is similar to the socialism of Kautsky who preached the class struggle and yet emphasised priority on the attempt to realise reforms.

This type of Marxism is possibly hegemonic within the groups claiming to be Marxist. The emphasis on developing the class struggle has actually resulted in ideological horizons that are based on adaption to the perspective of what is possible within capitalism rather than trying to connect the significance of the contradictions of capitalism with the aim of brining about a different form of society. The actual political result of this standpoint is an effective acceptance of the leadership of the trade union bureaucracy. This is because the perspective of trying to obtain concessions from capitalism is compatible with the role of the trade union bureaucracy. Hence these reformist forces cannot advocate a perspective that is truly independent of the aims of the trade union bureaucracy. This type of Marxism regards communism to be a distraction from the aim of developing mass struggle against the austerity measures and so what is defined as relevant is about making the various governments change policies. It would be unfair to define this type of reformism as classical reformism because it does not preach class compromise and is critical of the attempt to conciliate bourgeois governments. But it is reformist in that it cannot support a strategy that strives to go beyond capitalism. Instead the role of militant struggle is conceived as being able to challenge the implementation of austerity measures and to therefore realise a different form of capitalism. This is not the formal aim of these Marxists but it is the logic of their approach and rejection of the importance of communism as a historic aim.

What attitude should principled Marxists have towards this type of Marxism? They should develop an analysis and strategy that attempts to connect the aspirations of the immediate situation with the aim of communism. This means honestly rejecting any illusion that the interests of the working class can be realised within capitalism in terms of a change of governmental policy. Whilst we do not reject the possibility of concessions because of changes in the balance of class forces this prospect is not our aim because any concessions will be temporary and will not resolve the crisis of capitalism that has led to the very introduction of austerity measures. The only strategy that corresponds to the needs and interests of the working class is one that strives to realise communism because the very significance of the crisis is that the era of reforms is over. Any illusions in reforms, however militant it is posed, is not based on a recognition of what is in the class interests of working people. Capitalism cannot become acceptable and humane because of mass pressure. Instead mass pressure should be developed in order to advance the prospect of communism as the revolutionary answer to the crisis. Consequently no theoretical concessions should be made towards this form of reformist Marxism and we should develop the arguments that indicate that this type of reformist Marxism is based on illusions about what is possible within contemporary capitalism. However within the context of rejection of ideological neutrality and compromise principled Marxists should be prepared to work with reformist Marxists against the austerity measures. The necessity of theoretical struggle and the rejection of the illusions of reformist Marxists will not mean rejecting the prospect of united fronts. This situation is different to the historical question of work with the supporters of Bernstein who rejected the importance of the class struggle as the basis of their support for reforms. In contrast we are talking about people who advocate the class struggle and yet are unsure of their historical aims and have an ambiguous attitude towards communism. The aim of principled Marxists should be to resolve this contradiction and indicate that the only basis to advance the class struggle is with the perspective of communism rather than trying to obtain concessions from bourgeois governments. We should aim to dispel illusions in theory and practice rather than organisationally exclude the prospect of united work with reformist Marxists.

The reformists historically rejected Marxism and started an ideological offensive against Marxism. They wanted to provide an alternative to Marxism and this was how they posed the alternative of reforms versus revolution. This type of reforms is still present but it has increasingly become a type of bourgeois liberalism and has rejected any relation to socialism. However the impetus for a new type of reformism is present in terms of the spontaneous illusions of the mass movement of struggle against the austerity measures. The role of reformist Marxists is to adapt to these illusions and to reject the advocacy of a principled alternative to these illusions. This approach is influential and so the role of principled Marxists who advocate communism is marginalised. The worst mistake would be to adapt to the views of reformist Marxism as being the natural expression of the mass movement. Instead what is required is ideological struggle and the attempt to transform the spontaneous mass movement into a conscious struggle for communism. This process does not represent telling the mass movement what to do because the important point is that the mass movement cannot realise its potential as long as it is subject to illusions about what is possible under capitalism. It may seem that the utilisation of militancy is identical to the expression of the potential of mass struggle but militancy without a definite aim will sooner or later become involved in a strategic crisis. This is indicated in Greece. The anger of the masses has led to opposition to the austerity measures but the question is how can this protest be developed into struggle at a higher level? The inability to answer this question has led to an impasse and the prospect of failure. The only way to resolve this impasse is to develop support for measures that aim to go beyond capitalism and so indicate the prospect of communism. This type of impasse will occur for every mass movement that does not become conscious of the importance of communism, and so the role of Marxists is to popularise communism. But the reformist Marxists unintentionally discredit communism because they suggest what is important is the here and now and the future will take care of itself. However the future is not what is unobtainable and distant and is instead the answer to the problems of today. Furthermore the prospect of the future is what is expressed by the very possibilities of the mass struggle. The mass struggle represents aspects of what communism could be like and the principle of solidarity that unites the various forms of struggle is an expression of how communism could be constructed.

Lenin makes the point that conciliation of reformism results in opportunism and betrayal of the class struggle. This is why it is important to recognise that reformism is not just national and is instead an international manifestation that has to be opposed resolutely in relation to rejecting all its various national forms. The point he is making is that the standpoint of Bernstein is not just about a development in Germany and has actually developed throughout Europe. The history of reformism is about the evolution of Social Democracy and Stalinism became a form of reformism that also rejected the struggle for revolution. The further development of Social Democracy and Stalinism has meant that they have rejected the previous organic relation to reformism. Hence reformism has been without an organised form and has been tentatively defended by the trade unions. This has meant reformism as an ideology has attempted to acquire an organised political expression. Marxism has been marginalised in the recent period but the prospects for overcoming this marginalisation have occurred in terms of adaptation to the illusions of the mass movement that is developing against the austerity measures. The tendency is to effectively reject the banner of communism and instead adopt a programme that is about the present and immediate. Hence the emphasis is on the prospect of reforms as a result of militant class struggle. However the various advocates of reformism often manage to avoid being called reformist because they do not outline their programmes in terms of reforms and instead write about anti-capitalist measures. They are defined in terms of what they are against and so the result is a conception of tactics as a process, or the expression of the dynamism of the class struggle. In these vague terms they can reject the reformist label. Any emphasis on communism can be denounced as an expression of propaganda and therefore irrelevant for the class struggle. The whole focus of strategy is on the present and what is defined as possible and the central aim becomes to persuade the trade union leaders to adopt this approach. What is not understood is that this apparently intransigent posture is actually an adaptation to the negotiating stance of the trade union leaders. The reformist Marxists have become the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy and effectively adopt a stance that is acceptable to the trade unions. In this context principled Marxists are considered to be opponents of the unity of the mass movement and dogmatic for their insistence on the strategic importance of communism. But only the principled Marxists are dedicated to Lenin’s task of a resolute struggle against reformism in all its forms. In contrast the reformist Marxists become a variety of Russian economism and adapt to the spontaneous limitations of the mass movement. This means they accept the trade union politics of the trade union bureaucracy.

In other words the question of the seriousness about adherence to communism is becoming an important test that differentiates principled Marxists from reformist Marxists. The latter effectively have doubts about the communist future and therefore do not formulate demands in a manner that is transitional to communism. Lenin’s remarks about Russian economism are important reference points for understanding this reformist Marxism. He argues that the Russian economists dislike the prospect of ideological struggle and instead insist on support for a type of struggle that has been justified by the material conditions and which is the only possible one under the given circumstances. This approach would amount to a repudiation of the importance of struggle with the legal Marxism that was permitted by the Tsarist authorities because it seemed to be a moderate alternative to the radicalism of the Social Revolutionary Party and represented the standpoint of Bernstein and the approach of class compromise. The task of principled Marxism was to conduct theoretical work that demarcated itself from legal Marxism and to also attempt to raise the consciousness of the mass movement that was developing: “Thirdly, it was imperative to come out actively against confusion and unsteadiness in the practical movement, exposing and refuting any attempt to consciously or unconsciously lower the level of our program and tactics.”(p692) The supporters of economism rejected the importance of this task because they argued that the present struggle was all that was possible under the given circumstances and material conditions. This approach was a conciliation of the forces of opportunism.

The contemporary reformist Marxism is not an expression of the standpoint of historical forms of opportunism. But in the situation in which intense theoretical discussion is required about the way forward for the mass movement they reject the importance of this strategic and programmatic clarification and instead content themselves with the view that the present development of the struggle is sufficient and is making considerable progress. They are not primarily concerned about the lack of connection between Marxism and the mass struggle and instead contend that advances are being made and that this is all that is possible under the given circumstances. Hence they reject the role of theory in order to establish a connection between Marxism and the mass movement. The view of these reformist Marxists is that the logic of the struggle will establish the basis of relations between Marxism and the mass movement and so underestimate the importance of theory and ideological struggle in establishing this connection. In previous times the economists were also relatively unconcerned about the isolation of Marxism from the mass movement. They argued that the mass struggle had made progress and that the concern of the workers with the economic struggle would acquire a political dynamic and so the class conflict would advance to a higher level. Hence they did not agree that the mass struggle had to establish connections with Marxism for higher forms of the struggle to develop. In other words they glorified the present low level of consciousness of the workers and insisted that this situation was all that was possible under the given circumstances. The result was the underestimation of the complexity of the tasks of Social Democracy and indifference to the imperative to establish a political connection between Social Democracy and the mass struggle.

Contemporary reformists Marxists have also made these types of mistakes. They also effectively think that the isolation of Marxists from the mass struggle is not a problem because the struggle will generate the political conditions to overcome this isolation. The development of the struggle will resolve all problems and the marginalisation of Marxism will be overcome. This is a complacency that underestimates the immensity of the tasks involved. The problem is not just the isolation of Marxism from the working class but also the indifference of working people with regards to the importance of Marxism. We have to convince people that Marxism is important in relation to the requirements of class struggle and this task cannot be spontaneously resolved by the very dynamics of the emerging mass movement. Marxism has to theoretically develop if it is to be equal to the tasks relating to the development of the class struggle. But it is this type of theoretical clarification that is disliked by the reformist Marxists who argue that the role of theory and ideology should act as an uncritical supplement to the actual progress of the mass struggle. The role of the freedom of criticism should be about making unreflective comments in support of the mass struggle. Hence theory should not be about establishing the present limitations of the struggle and attempting to indicate how this can be overcome. Instead we should arrive at agreement around practical demands that represent the level of development of the mass struggle and how it can make progress. It is deemed sectarian to argue that the very prospect of progress is unlikely as long as the connection between Marxism and the masses is not established.

Consequently the reformist Marxists would reject any suggestion of a relationship to the historical reformists of the early 20th century. They would be correct in their assertion because they have a doctrine that is based on the importance of the class struggle and formal adherence to revolutionary principles. But like the economists of Russia they dislike the prospect of ideological struggle and have an uncritical attitude towards the level of development of the mass struggle. They essentially consider that the struggle is making sufficient progress and as a result will ultimately be able to challenge the austerity measures of the government. Hence they do not consider that the isolation of Marxism from the mass struggle is a matter of concern and therefore argue that any isolation will be overcome by the progress made by the struggle. In other words similar to the historic economists the reformist Marxists ‘want the revolutionaries to admit the full rights of the movement now existing….that is the ‘legitimacy’ of the existence of that which exists; they demand that the ‘ideologues’ should not try to cause the movement ‘to stray’ from the path that is determined by the interaction of the material elements with the material environment’…..they demand that we acknowledge as desirable the struggle ‘that is the only possible one for the workers to conduct under the present circumstances’ and that we acknowledge that as the only one possible, the ‘struggle that they are actually conducting at the present situation. We revolutionary Social Democrats are unhappy with this kow-towing to stikhiinost…we demand changes in the given situation and strive against kow-towing to this situation and any reconciliation with it.”(p694).

In terms of the contemporary context it would be unreasonable to suggest that with a different form of Marxism the struggle would make more progress. The most important problem is not that struggle is unlikely and therefore requires the application of Marxism in order to generate struggle. This is not the criticism being made. Instead we are arguing that the initial development of the mass struggle indicates illusions that will at some point result in important strategic problems and cause a political crisis for the emerging mass movement. The major problem is the illusion that we can bring about a situation in which the government changes policy and therefore rejects the implementation of its austerity measures. It is crucial to understand that the various bourgeois governments are committed to the austerity plans and are introducing measures of financial discipline in order to ensure that countries like Greece strictly adhere to the aim of reducing national debt. In this situation it would be a serious illusion to believe that mass pressure can bring about a transformation of this situation which results in a change of policy. It is important to recognise that the ruling class of various countries are determined to resolve the crisis at the expense of working people and so the possible of concessions is very slender. This means that the only possible, principled and consistent strategy is one aiming to replace capitalism with communism or a system that benefits working people instead of capital. However this vital point is not being made by the latter day Economists because they consider that the emergence of mass struggle is actually sufficient and what is necessary in order to defeat the austerity measures of the government. Hence they are effectively unconcerned that the mass movement is not aiming to bring about communism and instead they effectively argue that the mass movement will create its own strategy for success and so generate aims that can be realised. Hence the reformist Marxists do not want to create difficulties in their relations with supporters of the mass movement by mentioning something as obscure as communism and instead they want to concentrate on what the working class considers to be practical and relevant. This actually means adopting the programme of the trade union bureaucracy and accommodating to its reformist and negotiating posture.

Consequently the reformist Marxists are not asking the most important question which is how do we make communism attractive and an important aspiration of the mass struggle? They do not want to ask this question because it means raising criticisms about the existing level of class consciousness and the limitations of mass struggle. Instead in a mechanical manner they consider that the struggle itself will resolve all outstanding political questions and so do not accept that the struggle itself will create problems that cannot be resolved without the application of the role of Marxist theory. This attitude means that they agree with the economistic standpoint that the struggle as it is developing is the best possible one under the given circumstances. Hence they do not want to suggest improvements and reject the importance of strategic guidance. This also means they adapt to the present low level of class consciousness and so are indifferent to the fact that Marxism seems to be irrelevant to the present participants in the mass struggle. Hence what they are not providing is theoretical clarification and leadership that is capable of posing the central question as being about the continuation of capitalism or the possibility of communism. These criticisms are not meant to suggest that the reformist Marxists are not carrying out important Marxist propaganda about the irreconcilable interests between the employers and the workers and that only the class struggle can advance the interests of working people. This is not the problem but they are not then articulating how the class contradictions of society can only be resolved with the advent of communism. Instead struggle is presented as perpetual and the permanent condition of society. What results is accommodating to struggle as it develops and the sense of what it could become is not articulated. Hence the perspective adopted towards the existing struggle is not from the vantage point of communism and is instead about what the struggle can obtain within capitalism. This is why the struggle with all its illusions about what is possible within capitalism becomes considered to be satisfactory by the reformist Marxists. Any criticism concerns the level of militancy and not because of the rejection of the communist approach.

Lenin outlines how the economists repeat Marx’s comment that the development of a mass movement is more important than programmes but this is true only in the last analysis and should not be utilised in order to reject the importance of theory and principles: “Without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. It is impossible to emphasise this thought too much at a time when along with the fashionable preaching of opportunism people are carried away with the narrowest possible forms of practical activity.”(p696). This point can be made in a contemporary context. The reformist Marxists are the first to scorn anyone who tries to argue for the importance of principles in relation to the tasks of developing a mass movement. They maintain that principles are a luxury and the real issue is to develop struggles and militancy. In other words practice is compared favourably to theory and the lessons of the past are forgotten about the importance of theory. The major concern of the reformist Marxists is to make themselves relevant to the struggle and to therefore accommodate to any indifference to theory that is expressed by the participants of the mass movement. Theory becomes something that has little relation to the practicalities of the struggle and is limited to the doctrines of party ideology. Any Marxist who raises the importance of theory in relation to the struggle is treated In a hostile manner and marginalised. The result is the mass movement is demarcated from the role of theory and knowledge is treated with suspicion. The view develops that the instinct, will and mood of the movement is sufficient to promote progress. In contrast Lenin is arguing that the prospect to ensure real influence of the revolutionary party is dependent on the role and importance of theory. Theoretical struggle has been crucial in the development of Russian Marxism and it was required in order to demarcate principled Marxism from the moderate legal Marxism and the alternative approach of the Social Revolutionary party. This is also the lesson of the German experience. However the contemporary reformist Marxists support the approach of the Russian economists who considered that adaptation to the level of the emerging mass movement was what would make Marxism influential. This does not mean that they are primitive at the level of theory. On the contrary organisations like the SWP have many gifted theoreticians who are able to make important contributions to our understanding of economics, history, politics and sociology. But they reject the importance of programmes and strategy in order to have a flexible and opportunist relation to the mass movement. Everyday politics is determined by what will be popular and supported by the mass movement.

The approach of Lenin is different. He argues that without revolutionary theory a principled party cannot be built. The contempt of theory can allow opportunism to thrive and justifies adaptation to the mass movement at a low level of class consciousness. A principled approach to the class struggle requires the progress of theory and this standpoint is rejected by the economists because they prefer to be influential and so theory becomes reduced to what is acceptable to the mass movement at any given moment in time. The result is the rejection of the struggle against autocracy because this is considered to be ambitious and a distraction from the importance of economic struggle. In contemporary terms the reformist Marxists deny the importance of the aim of communism because this is an unwelcome distraction from the tasks of the mass movement in the present. The question of communism can be articulated in books of theory that do not influence the mass movement. Lenin would argue that the role of theory is to promote the development of a relationship between party and class. In relation to present tasks the aim of communism can be shown to be the logical outcome of the development of class struggle against the austerity measures. This means we must articulate what we mean by communism and also show that the potential for communism is present within capitalism. In contrast to what is possible under communism the continuation of capitalism will be expressed in terms of crisis and the worsening of the material conditions of working people. But the reformist Marxists in the last analysis do not reject the illusion that capitalism can be improved as a result of the implementation of different policies. This view is the logical conclusion of their rejection of the relation of theory to the development of class struggle. In a similar manner the Economists accommodated the illusion that society could be improved under Tsarism as a result of trade union activity and so they rejected the aim of the overthrow of the autocracy as being ambitious or for the long term future of Russia. Hence in both instances reformist conclusions are the result of an indifference to the role of theory.

To Lenin the practical conclusion of the role of theory is to support a perspective that the central aim of the working class movement is the overthrow of the autocracy. This is not the present aim of the mass movement but the very development of struggle will create the prospect of revolution against the autocracy. In a similar manner we can argue that the present am of the contemporary mass movement is not to introduce communism but the prospect of progress to a higher level of struggle will create the political conditions for communism to become strategically important. The central task of Marxism is to theoretically argue for communism as the strategic aim of the mass struggle. In contrast reformist Marxism argues that communism is a distraction that cannot advance the struggle and instead we should raise demands that are more realistic and obtainable. This argument is effectively suggesting that the working class is incapable of realising the consciousness that would support the call for communism. The working class as it is constituted is indifferent to the demand for communism and instead is concerned about obtaining concessions from the government. This may be an accurate assessment of the present consciousness of the working class but we should not accommodate to this situation as an accomplished fact and instead should develop an intervention that attempts to raise the consciousness of the working class so that it becomes receptive to the demand for communism. This process would require ideological struggle but this is precisely what the reformist Marxists are reluctant to engage in and instead they are for a policy of peaceful co-existence with the mass movement. They believe that by tailing the movement they can develop influence and popularity. This is a mistake because at a certain point the policy of trying to get concessions from the government will be shown to be an illusion. The result will be a strategic crisis and the reformist Marxists will be disorientated. Instead of becoming popular they will have been discredited. This is what happened to the Russian Economists who effectively rejected the struggle against the autocracy because it was considered too ambitious and so when the possibility developed of struggle at a higher level they were shown to be anachronistic. The result was the isolation of Economism.

The above arguments are not meant as a rejection of the importance of reforms. It is entirely possible that reforms can be possible because of the development of favourable conditions in the class struggle. However the point is that in a period of crisis reforms should not be our priority and the emphasis on gaining reforms can only result in the disorientation of the mass movement. This is because the actual choice posed by the crisis is between the continuation of capitalism or communism. If capitalism does continue it will be on the basis that the era of reform is definitely over. The reformist Marxist may argue that nobody knows what communism is and therefore the mass movement is not receptive to the argument for communism. This is true but this situation only goes to prove that the argument for communism has to be made and so the prospect will be created that people do start to take communism seriously and come to consider that it is a historical reality rather than a dogmatic aspect of theory. In contrast the attitude of the reformist Marxists represents contempt for communism and so they contribute to the very marginalisation of the perspective of communism. Their perspective is based on the view that only reforms within capitalism are a valid option. The issue of an alternative society is considered to represent the attitude of moral protest and not relevant for the mass struggle. However this approach actually represents the attempt to influence the mass movement in a reformist manner and therefore opposes the perspective of revolution and its potential outcome as communism. It is true that few people presently support revolution or communism but the attitude of the reformist Marxists only contributes to the credibility of this viewpoint. The emphasis on what is practical, immediate and concrete is utilised in order to discredit the principled Marxist approach of support for revolution as the only answer to the problems of the working class. Hence we have an important political contradiction between the approach of reformist Marxism and revolutionary Marxism. An important task for the principled Marxists is to indicate the limitations of reformist Marxism in order to promote the development of the class consciousness of the working class. If reformist Marxism remains effectively hegemonic the result will be genuine Marxism will remain marginalised. This will mean the genuine merger of socialism with the mass movement will not have been realised.

One of the most important messages of Lenin’s WITBD is the call for a merger between socialism and the mass movement. The Economists are unable to bring about the fusion between socialism with the mass organisations of the working class. This criticism can be made of the reformist Marxists. At the level of formal theory the reformist Marxists have contributed many erudite works that advocate the standpoint of revolution and communism. But in terms of practice this work is reduced in importance and instead the standpoint of reformism is adopted. The reformist Marxists use their influence and prestige to argue for the credibility of reforms as the basis of the advance of the mass movement. Principled Marxism is presented as being the standpoint of cranks and sectarians. In a similar manner the Russian Economists considered the émigré organisation around the Iskra journal to be out of touch and dogmatic. Iskra was said to be the work of propaganda and the rejection of tactics and action. Hence the reformist Marxists also present themselves as being practical people and opposed to those that do nothing. It is argued that we should set aside doctrinal differences and unite in support of the mass movement, although each reformist Marxist group has established its own campaign of support which partially contradicts the rhetoric. However the crucial point is that the crude political approach of the reformist Marxists means that the opportunity to create a fusion between socialism and the mass movement is being undermined. The point is not that the crisis is a guarantee of the establishment of a relationship between socialism and the mass organisations of the working class. Instead what is happening is that the actions and comments of the reformist Marxists are repudiating the very chance to establish a political relation between socialism and the working class. Working people can only perceive that the reformist Marxist groups have similar aspirations in the striving for reform rather than revolution. The result is a regression in class consciousness rather than the promotion of support for revolution and communism.

Lenin makes the vital point that adherence to the line of least resistance is not principled and cannot advance the prospect of mass revolutionary consciousness. Instead the very limitations in class consciousness are glorified as being the expression of what the mass movement is capable of, and the result is the actual opposition of so-called Marxists to the promotion of theoretical struggle in order to develop class consciousness. This does not mean that the party can substitute itself for the class; rather what is being argued for is that the role of the party is to act in a principled manner in order not to glorify the existing level of class consciousness and to therefore advance the struggle for the development of higher levels of consciousness. The carrying out of this task does not undermine the creativity of the working class. On the contrary the successful realisation of this task should result in the promotion of the ability of workers to struggle against capitalism and for communism. Alternatively the working class is acting at the level of a reformist consciousness that can bring about some gains in terms of trade union struggle but it will not generate the prospect of the challenging the system. The role of the reformist Marxists is to present trade union struggle as all that is required and needed and so effectively argue against the transformation of this struggle into a struggle that creates the political conditions for revolution and communism.

WITBD – Chapter Two

It is in chapter two of WITBD that Lenin beings to develop his ideas in detail. He argues that the working class movement has developed militancy in the struggle against Tsarism. This movement would have been receptive to the standpoint of Social Democracy but the various organisations of Social Democracy had been undermined by state persecution. This meant the relationship between Social Democracy and the working class was not created. It was not possible for the working class to create by its own efforts a Social Democratic level of consciousness: “We stated that there could not have been a Social Democratic awareness (at that time) among the workers. It could only have been brought in from the outside. The history of all countries bears witness that exclusively with its own forces the worker class is in a condition to work out a trade-unionist awareness, that is a conviction of the need to unite in unions, to carry on struggle with the owners, to strive for the promulgation by the government of this or that law that is necessary for the workers and so on. The doctrine of socialism grew out of those philosophic, historical and economic theories that were worked out by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intelligentsia.”(p702).

It is important to recognise that Lenin does not understand this process of the relationship of the working class to socialism in rigid terms. He is only making the claim that in the political conditions of the 1880’s and 1890’s of Russia the working class was unable to establish a conscious connection with the doctrines of socialism. In this situation the basis for the introduction of socialism to the working class would have to come from outside the working class through the role of the Marxist intelligentsia. The working class by its own efforts had only been able to realise a trade union consciousness that expressed the view that militant action could advance the interests of the working class without the necessity of the revolutionary transformation of society. Hence the economic struggle of the working class had not in and of itself resulted in a political consciousness of the perspective that an important aim of the mass movement was the overthrow of the autocracy. This did not mean that the working class was not receptive to this revolutionary perspective but rather that in order to make this perspective popular required the merger of the working class with the doctrine of socialism. The organised and political relation of the working class with socialism would bring about the consciousness of the importance of the overthrow of the autocracy and also bring about a recognition that the trade union struggle in and of itself was not an adequate expression of the possibility to develop the class struggle.

Lenin is arguing that the establishment of the conscious and organised relation between the working class and the Social Democratic movement would facilitate the process of development of a higher level of class consciousness. Hence he disagrees with the Economist trend that argues that the working class by its own efforts can realise the necessary consciousness that is required for the development of the class struggle. The working class can establish rudimentary forms of organisation and express militancy and develop collective forms of action but this is not identical to the attainment of socialist forms of consciousness that can only originate from outside of the class struggle. Objections to this standpoint would suggest that what is outside of the class struggle cannot have a direct and important effect on the material conditions of the social relations and therefore cannot have an influence on the mass movement. Only that which originates from inside the class struggle can represent the prospect of having an influence on the role of the working class. This is why the trade unions are not just the defence organisations of the working class they also represent the potential to develop higher forms of class struggle and to facilitate the promotion of political aspirations within the working class. However what Lenin is concerned with is the social origins of the theoretical representatives of socialism. He is not trying to suggest that the class struggle does not promote an understanding of the strategy and perspectives for the task of the overthrow of the autocracy and the process of social transformation to communism. It is the very oppressive character of Tsarism that makes the working class receptive to the demand for the overthrow of the autocracy. The point is which social strata is able to interpret the class struggle and develop revolutionary conclusions?

In other words the dynamic of class struggle does not in and of itself enable the working class to generate a revolutionary class consciousness. For this prospect to occur requires the interaction between the organisation of socialism and the working class. It is quite possible that workers will be among the groups of intellectuals that develop the doctrine of socialism but the class struggle in and of itself does not develop this high level of theoretical understanding. However it is important to understand that the very relevance of theory is its ability to comment on and reflect upon the lessons of the class struggle. All that Lenin is trying to suggest is that the original representatives of socialist theory will come from outside of the working class but this situation will not be lasting and instead it is the very importance of the class struggle that will promote the role of worker intellectuals who are organised into a Marxist party. Only if a political relation between party and class is established will it be possible for the party to have credibility in connection to its views on perspectives and programme for the class struggle. If the party remains isolated from the class and is remote from the development of the class struggle its views will be ignored and instead the working class will act in accordance with the logic of elementary protest against capital. This situation will not promote the process of the socialist transformation of the class struggle.

Lenin was able to argue that the very interaction of Social Democracy with the class was able to generate the ability of the class to go beyond trade union consciousness in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. This situation was expressed in the formation of Soviets and their potential to represent the possibilities for an alternative and the political prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society. The very receptiveness of the working class to support Social Democratic doctrine had been shown in practice by the formation of organisations that posed the prospect for the overthrow of the system and advance towards communism. This situation did not mean that the role of the party had become redundant but rather that the party was still required in order to theoretically reflect on this process of movement to a higher level of the class struggle. But what the situation did mean was that the very elementary development of the class struggle had gone beyond the limitations of trade union struggle and so the tasks of the party could become more ambitious. The very success of the party in interacting with the class had promoted this situation and the relationship had become that of the party interacting with the class that was spontaneously revolution. This process indicated that the view that socialism originated outside of the working class was historically conditioned by the very level of development of the class struggle. Hence the view that socialism originated from outside of the class struggle was essentially an expression of the beginning of the class struggle when this conflict was ideologically understood in crude terms by the workers. The very development of the class struggle would generate the prospect for a higher level of understanding and the very success of the interaction of party and class would create the conditions for socialist levels of consciousness within the working class. This situation was indicated by the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917. The very success of the Russian revolution led to the formation of a vanguard section of the working class in Europe that had communism as its conscious aim.

However how do we characterise the situation today? A period of defeats combined with important structural changes within capitalism has led to the questioning of the very collective character of working class activity. Marxism has also been discredited by the historical experience of Stalinism and revolution has been ideologically considered as political excess and the aim of a different society has been defined as totalitarian. Hence the view that the working class has been finished as a social force has been supplemented by the standpoint that Marxism is historically exhausted. But this dire political situation has been challenged by the questioning of capitalism because of the recent economic crisis. Criticism of capitalism has not been sufficient to generate support for a communist alternative and so the spontaneous consciousness of the present is to strive for an improved capitalism that would be more ethical and responsive to the demands of society. This ideological confusion goes alongside the crisis of Marxism. The increasing militancy of the class struggle is generating new illusions that the role of the economic struggle and the importance of the trade unions will somehow realise the aspirations of society. Support for socialism is very low and is not spontaneously generated by the class struggle in this situation of ideological confusion. It would also be fatalistic and mechanical to assume that the economic crisis will automatically create the conditions for the emergence of Marxism and the credibility of its perspective for socialism. Instead we are in a situation in which the task of creating support for socialism has to come from outside the class struggle and in that sense are at a new beginning for the doctrine of socialism. However it is important to understand that unlike the Russian workers of the 19th century the contemporary working class is not necessarily receptive to the message of Marxism and Socialism and the problem of indifference and confusion is considerable.

Lenin was making the point that the elementary character of the class struggle and the influence of trade union politics did not meant the Russian workers were not receptive to the message of socialism and Marxism. On the contrary there was tremendous potential popular support for socialism. Hence the task was for Social Democracy to improve its organisation in order to enhance the prospect to interact with the working class. This meant there was nothing pessimistic or elitist about arguing that socialism as a doctrine originated from outside the class struggle. The question of the origins of socialism did not mean that the working class was not a potentially revolutionary class and would reject those that propagated the socialist doctrine. But the very complicated history of socialism has meant that the contemporary working class are sceptical about the claims of Marxism and so there is ideological opposition to the influence of Marxism within the mass movement. The ascendency of the trade union bureaucracy and the credibility of trade union politics have never been greater despite important setbacks for the trade union movement. Consequently Marxism has to develop convincing arguments in order to overcome the scepticism within the working class about socialism and therefore to develop relentless ideological struggle in favour of the perspective of revolution and communism. But this task is complicated by the very fact that the reformist Marxists accommodate to the standpoint of the trade union bureaucracy and as a result unintentionally contribute to the view that Marxism is finished in political terms.

Marxism has to develop the theoretical understanding that it is still relevant to the class struggle and this aspect is related to the importance of strategy. The point is that the question of articulating the importance of Marxism is not about imposing the role of the party onto the class struggle and is instead about indicating the vital theoretical importance of Marxism. This process has two major forms, of strategy and the goal of communism. Marxism has to provide vital strategic advice about how the mass movement can realise its objectives, which would also include arguments about the objectives that the mass movement has ignored. Secondly, Marxism has to argue that the goals of the mass movement can only be realised by the advent of a communist society. Hence Marxism has to provide arguments that would make communism credible and therefore not an ideal that can never be realised. Making this perspective credible will not be easy. It is important to understand that the role of Marxism occurs in the context of a conflict of opposites. The standpoint of Marxism is in contradiction to the ideological views of the mass movement and so the prospect of success of Marxism cannot occur without intransigent political struggle. Marxism is trying to indicate to the mass movement that its scepticism and distrust of Marxism is not in the interests of working people and therefore the strategy of Marxism is more credible than the spontaneous strategy of reliance on the role of the trade union bureaucracy. Consequently, the conflict of opposites is between Marxism and the spontaneous ideology of trade union politics and any vacillation in this struggle can only be to the advantage of the trade union leaders.

It is important to recognise that the role of the trade union bureaucracy was still primitive in the Russia of the 19th century and therefore the major political conflict was between the role of Marxism and the limitations of existing class consciousness. But this class consciousness was not necessarily opposed to Marxism and was receptive to the doctrine of socialism. It is this aspect that has changed in the modern context and it could be argued that the spontaneous ideology of the working class has become explicitly anti-Marxist. This means the tasks of creating a merger of socialism and the mass movement is even more complicated and therefore the task cannot be resolved by merely propagandising the ideas of Marxism within the working class. In the past it was merely sufficient to argue for Marxism and gains would be made and so the problem was that of lack of organisation rather than the credibility of Marxism as a doctrine. In the present situation the problem is Marxism and its theoretical claims and so the priority is to refute the objections to Marxism if its credibility is to be re-established. However the various representatives of Marxism have not grasped the enormity of this task and instead continue to write works that gloss over the importance of the scepticism about the credibility of Marxism. In other words they write as if Marxism is not in crisis, or alternatively they recognise the crisis of Marxism and so become pessimistic and so fail to rise to the challenges posed by the complicated situation.

 It is important to recognise that the very historical development of the class struggle means that spontaneous development will not resolve theoretical tasks. Instead Lenin is right to insist that socialism has to be introduced from outside the class struggle. However we should also remember that Lenin believed that this relationship would be temporary and would probably apply to the beginning of the class struggle in most countries. Hence the very development of the class struggle would create the political conditions for socialism to become the ideology of the mass movement. But the very problems in the process of revolutionary transformation and the realisation of communism has meant that what was considered to be correct for the beginning of the class struggle has re-emerged as true for the period of a more mature period of class struggle. Marxism is having to reinvent itself for the present generation and to argue that it is not historically exhausted and its starting point is not favourable because it is marginalised and isolated from the mass movement and is not in a situation where it can rapidly become influential. The enormity of the challenge means that it would be easy to reject the claims of Marxism as dogmatic and inflexible and not relevant for the tasks of developing the mass movement. If the Economists were able to make this argument in the past period which was favourable to Marxism, the political conditions for receptiveness to this standpoint are much greater in the present period. It could be argued that most activists are already resistant to the standpoint of Marxism and try to argue for the development of the struggle in terms that reject the claims of revolutionary Marxism.

The proponents of Marxism would not be doing themselves a favour if they try to gloss over the unfavourable character of this situation and instead try to provide a rationalisation of possible rapid development of the influence of their ideas. Hence it would be a mistake to believe that the serious character of the crisis will result in the growth of the influence of Marxism in the short-term. Instead it is not possible to anticipate how quickly the influence of Marxism could grow despite the background of an unfavourable situation. When Lenin was outlining the origins of socialism from outside the working class he was also arguing that this relationship would be temporary and short-term and that the working class could rapidly become Social Democratic. Hence he was arguing that the Economists were pessimistic in suggesting that trade union consciousness was all that was possible in relation to the process of development of the class struggle. But in the present conditions the establishment of a relationship between socialism originating from outside the mass movement with the class struggle would be an immense achievement. The successful conclusion of this task would have unknown consequences because the influence of reformism has been hegemonic for long periods of time. The class struggle has occurred without the influence of Marxism and with the growing discrediting of Marxism. The mass influence of Marxism would mean that the prospect of the development of an alternative leadership to the trade union bureaucracy would become possible. No longer would the defensive strategy of the trade unions dictate the character of the class struggle and the political role of the Labour party would also be challenged in this situation. Marxism would no longer be a theory and instead it will have become a practice. But it is important to realise that this situation will probably intensify the class struggle to the point where the issue is raised about which class rules society. Marxism will have to have important strategic answers to this crucially important question. The failure to articulate valid strategy, and the prospect of new defeats in the class struggle, could result in an acute crisis of Marxism that will be even more difficult to recover from.

However this scenario is in the future and is based on the confident prediction that Marxism can overcome its present isolation and become relevant for the development of the class struggle. But at present Marxism is expressing an inability to go from A to B and is effectively sharing the confusion of activists about the prospects of development of the class struggle. It is also important to recognise that most of the activists do not conceive of themselves as part of a class struggle and instead define their actions in terms of moral protest against capitalism or as defence of pension rights. The very term class struggle seems to be anachronistic and to have little relevance for present militant activity. This is why one of the important tasks of Marxism is to outline in a convincing manner that what is occurring is the class struggle and that the interests of labour should be realised and the domination of capital has to be undermined. In other words the conception that capitalism is a system that cannot be effectively challenged is very popular and therefore generates a sense of futility and pessimism to many struggles. Hence Marxism has to strive to develop the popularity of an alternative world view that can indicate the importance of class struggle and the necessity of its resolution by means of revolution and the goal of communism. What is not properly understood by Marxists is that the present struggles are led by activists with a different world view that aims to modify the behaviour of Marxism. They mistrust any mention of the attempt to realise a different form of power and believe that Marxism is a doctrine of the 19th century. Marxism is being undermined by a cynicism that was not present at the time of Marx and Lenin. This is the result of the very development of the class struggle, but it means that the task of developing the influence of socialism from without is more urgent than ever.

The effect of police repression on the emerging Social Democratic movement in Russia in the 1890’s was to bring about the demise of the influence of the original leaders of the study circles and to promote a new layer of leadership. These tended to emphasise the view that the working class by itself could realise a principled ideology for the guidance of the class struggle. Lenin disputes this and argues: “This shows…….that any kow-towing before the stikhiinost of the worker movement, any disparagement of the role of the ‘purposive element’, of the role of Social Democracy, signals just by itself, - completely independent of whether the disparager wishes this or not – the strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology on the workers. All those who talk about the ‘over-valuation of ideology’, or the exaggeration of the role of the purposive element and so forth, imagine that a purely worker movement can work out by itself and is now working out an ideology standing by itself (apart from socialist ideology), if only the workers ‘tear their fate out of the hands of the leader guides.”(708-709) Lenin is considering a situation in which the original influence of Marxism has been decreased because of police repression and the new leaders are more willing to accommodate to the spontaneous dynamic of the workers movement. They argue that the role of Social Democracy is not indispensable in order to develop a principled ideology of the mass movement. It is possible that the mass movement by its own dynamism and logic can arrive at the generation of an ideology that represents the interests of the working class. Lenin argues that this is an illusion. The mass movement by its own actions and aspirations will not be able to overcome the limitations of bourgeois ideology. Social Democracy has to act in an organised and conscious manner in order to influence the mass movement in a socialist manner. Hence the Economists are abdicating the role of leadership and the theoretical tasks of developing the perspective for interaction with the mass movement in a principled manner. Only this process of conscious interaction will realise the generation of socialist ideology within the mass struggle.

This argument has proved to be historically vindicated. In situations in which the working class has been able to develop spontaneous aspirations for revolution the issue of conscious interaction with Marxism is still important. Without this interaction the working class lacks the organisation and programme that will facilitate the prospect of victory in the class struggle. Furthermore in normal circumstances the lack of an interaction between Marxism and the mass movement has meant the domination of the trade union bureaucracy, which has supported a Social Democratic stance of class compromise and opposition to the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society. In the present circumstances the isolation and marginalisation of Marxism and its estrangement from the mass movement has meant the trade union bureaucracy is ideologically hegemonic and dictates the tactics of the struggle against the austerity measures. This means an emphasis on the role of negotiation and the attempt to bring about an agreement between the government and the mass movement. The aim of revolution and communism is explicitly renounced by the defensive character of this type of approach. Hence the spontaneous character of the ideological development of the mass movement in the sense that there is not an interaction between the mass movement and Marxism has meant the political domination of an approach that is reformist and which is even critical of the prospects of militant struggle. However the aim of Marxism should not be to emphasise the call for more militancy because this will not in and of itself overcome the limitations of the prevailing spontaneous ideology of the mass organisations. Instead what is required is that the core values of Marxism should influence and interact with the mass movement and for this to occur the marginalisation of Marxism has to be ended. The point is that we do not want to arrive at a situation in which Marxism tells the working class how to act. This is not what is meant by the interaction of Marxism with the mass movement. Instead the issue of the interaction of Marxism with the class refers to the importance of strategy. This means a conscious rejection of the strategy of the trade union bureaucracy and instead the adoption of a strategy that acknowledges the importance of the class struggle and the possibility of an alternative to capitalism. The role of Marxism should not be about imposing itself on the class struggle and instead about generating purpose and precision into the actions and organisations of the mass movement.

To the extent that this is what Lenin is arguing about with the economists he could be considered to be correct. However if he also means that the trade unions and mass organisations of the working class should obey the dictate3s of the Marxist organisation his approach becomes problematical. He utilises a quote from Kautsky in order to suggest that the awareness of the tasks of the working class are brought to it from outside the class struggle by Social democracy.(p709) Does this mean the working class has little influence on the elaboration of the tasks and aims of the class struggle? Lenin does not properly answer this question. Instead he suggests that elementary struggle will result in an accommodation to trade union politics and the domination of bourgeois ideology. This standpoint seems to be generally correct in terms of historical experience but the issue remains concerning to what extent is the working class capable of contributing to the formulation of socialist tasks and aims? Lenin seems to absolutely answer this question in the negative and instead argue that only interaction of the class with the Social Democratic intelligentsia will promote a principled approach and recognition of the primacy of socialist ideology. This seems to suggest that the working class does not have a socialist potential until it interacts with Social Democracy, and so the working class movement by itself will naturally tend towards support for trade union politics and the acceptance of trade union politics. Hence the role of Social Democracy is to impose itself on the mass movement and to dictate that it rejects the approach of trade union politics: “Therefore our task – the task of Social Democracy consists of a struggle with stikiinost, consists in causing the worker movement to stray away from this strikhiinyi striving of trade-unionism toward accepting the leadership of the bourgeoisie and in causing the worker movement to go toward the leadership of revolutionary Social Democracy.”(p711).

Lenin also argues that the role of the material elements cannot bring about a socialist ideology within the working class and this standpoint is the illusion of the Economists. Only the intervention of Social Democracy can bring about the development of socialist ideology within the working class. This suggests that there is nothing socialist in the activity and logic of the class struggle and instead the result can only be support for trade union politics and accommodation to bourgeois ideology. However even if we accept that this is the general experience and assessment of the limitations of spontaneity it cannot explain all aspects of the development of the class struggle. The point is that if the class struggle did not have socialist aspects and possibilities it would be impossible for Marxism to interact and relate to the mass movement. Hence the trade union struggle is not just defined by accommodation to capitalism and instead represents the potential for solidarity and collective forms of organisation that anticipate the future society of communism. This observation does not meant that the role of Marxism should be merely to act as support for the trade unions in the uncritical manner suggested by the Economists. The very role of Marxism is to indicate the possibilities for socialism within the class struggle that may have been obscured and not obvious to the actual participants in the process of conflict. But it is important to understand that the actions of the trade unions are related to the very antagonism of capital and labour and suggest that the ultimate resolution of this conflict can only come about with the transcendence of the domination of capital by the realisation of a society based on the importance of labour. It is the very task of Marxism to indicate this aspect of trade union struggle and so contest the tendency for the trade union bureaucracy to justify a standpoint of class compromise. In contrast, Lenin seems to be arguing that the very character of trade union disputes is defined by class compromise and the hegemony of trade union politics. Hence there seems to be nothing socialist about strikes and the antagonism between capital and labour. This means the only aspect of socialism that is introduced into the class struggle is brought from outside by the intervention of Social Democracy. However what he does not address is why would workers be receptive to socialism if their struggles are inherently not socialist? In order to address this question we would suggest that the role of the Marxist party is to articulate and make explicit what is compatible with socialism in the struggles of workers and to indicate how this socialist possibility requires the revolutionary transformation of society for its definitive realisation.

In other words it is one thing for Lenin to suggest that the working class movement should interact with Marxism if this movement is to acquire purpose and adherence to socialist goals. He is correct to criticise the Economists who underestimate this task. However the importance of this criticism does not mean that the mass movement lacks any relation to socialism. It is only possible to win the mass movement to the goal of socialism and communism if it already had some relation to the aspiration of socialism. The role of Marxism is to outline and articulate what is obscured and repressed and so to show that the actions of the working class have the tendency to aspire to the realisation of socialism. This point can be made in terms of the developing struggle against the austerity measures. The ruling class considers that the public sector can be reduced in size and importance in order to decrease the national debt. The public sector is conceived as being secondary to the imperatives of capital accumulation and the interests of capitalism. In contrast the public sector workers argue that the public sector is important for the welfare of society and so should not be reduced by a process of cuts in expenditure. This standpoint is based on the implicit assumption that the requirement of welfare and need is as important as profit making. Marxists can make the point that the public sector can only consistently thrive in a socialist society that is based on the requirements of need rather than profit. Hence the defence of the public sector requires the realisation of socialism. Consequently the explicit trade union strategy of the mass movement is actually in conflict with the socialist type logic of the defence of the public sector. It is not class compromise that will realise the most effective defence of the public sector but rather the victory of socialism in the class struggle will create the conditions to ensure that the public sector is not undermined by the requirements of capital.

Thus Lenin’s absolute contrast between the trade unionist character of the mass movement and the socialist intervention of Social Democracy is too rigid. The actual situation is more complex. This is why the spontaneous struggle can generate socialist elements that are not properly understood and recognised. The role of Marxism is to indicate the importance of these socialist elements and to relate them to the development and progress of the class struggle. The trade union bureaucracy will obviously reject this reference to socialism because they have interests based on the adaptation to capitalism. This is why the trade union bureaucracy are opposed to socialism whilst the mass movement is susceptible to the arguments for socialism. The task of the Marxists is to outline the socialist perspective in terms of opposition to the importance of the trade union bureaucracy. Marxism can outline the aspects of socialism repressed by the spontaneous illusions of the mass struggle and instead outline how socialism is an integral aspect of the conflict with capitalism. To the extent that the Economists are also making this point they have a valid argument with Lenin. However they are also dogmatic because they contrast the struggle for socialism as having priority when contrasted with the struggle against the autocracy. Lenin instead indicated that the success of the struggle with the autocracy would stimulate the prospects for socialism. His perspective was more historically accurate but that does not mean his dismissal of the potential of spontaneous struggle was also precise. The spontaneous struggle also led to the challenges to the autocracy and ultimately promoted the very attempt to overthrow capitalism. in other words the very capacity of Marxism to interact with the mass movement was because the mass movement was able to go beyond the limitations of trade union politics and acquire revolutionary aspects. In this context Marxism was able as a organised revolutionary party to interact with the spontaneous revolutionary possibilities of the working class. The problems of trade union politics were shown to be a problem of a lower level of the class struggle.

However in the political conditions of contemporary capitalism the trade union bureaucracy is ideologically hegemonic. This means the mass struggle has a tendency to uphold trade union politics of reform and the justification of a defensive strategy. In this context the role of Marxism is to indicate the socialist aspects of the class struggle that have been denied by the approach of the trade union bureaucracy. The political struggle within the working class is that of the opposition between reform and revolution. Hence the trade union bureaucracy will emphasise what is realistic and important in the present and the Marxists will argue that any gains in the present can only be connected to the struggle for a better future. In this context ideological struggle will be occurring between socialist ideology and bourgeois ideology. If the working class was naturally predisposed to support bourgeois ideology and was inherently hostile to socialism the standpoint of Marxism could never be successful. But the very socialist aspect of the class struggle means that principled Marxism can acquire support in its articulation of the prospects for communism. Only the ideological confusion and scepticism within the working class will tend to favour the trade union bureaucracy in the ideological struggle. Furthermore support for the trade union bureaucracy will be apparent because of the perceived historical exhaustion of socialism and the apparent ascendency of capitalism but the interaction of Marxism with the dynamics of the class struggle can undermine this ideological hegemony of reformist politics. Victories will also increase the influence of Marxism but defeat will tend to discredit Marxism. In any eventuality the important task of Marxism is to indicate the socialist character of the aspirations of working people and to argue that the reformist approach of the trade union leadership is not sufficient in a period of acute intensification of class contradictions.

Lenin quotes from Kautsky in order to try and prove that socialism does not come directly from the class struggle. Instead socialism is a science that is introduced to the working class from outside the class struggle by the most gifted members of the intelligentsia. This comment may explain the historical origins of the doctrine of socialism which was developed by intellectuals who had only the remotest connection to the class struggle. But it is not adequate to explain the historical development of Marxism. Marx and Engels may not have been working class but they were inspired by the class struggle of the workers and used the lessons of class conflict in order to develop a strategy of revolutionary transformation and to articulate the goal of socialism and communism. They develop their understanding of society based on theoretical reflection upon the importance of the class struggle. This meant the standpoint of socialism did not really originate externally or outside the class struggle and instead was generated internally by a process of reflection concerning what was happening within the social relations of capitalism. The social origins of Marx and Engels may have been different to that of the workers they were commentating about but their motivation to develop the theory of socialism was in order to create a connection between this doctrine and the actual practice of the mass movement. This is why they said they were not inventing ideals for a mass move movement to correspond to and instead the ideals they advocated were created by reality itself. Consequently the most important lessons about the character of socialism and communism were created by the mass struggle that led to the formation of the Paris Commune. It was the very attempt to defend Paris from invasion by Prussia that led to the development of a situation that could represent what the communist society of the future could be like. The very attempt to defend Paris had led to a situation in which the principle of participatory democracy was advanced and the impetus for the abolition of the state made progress and a glimpse of the classless society was created. Marx did not attempt to impose socialism as a doctrine on these events instead he attempted to extract from actual developments the lessons for the class struggle and the prospect of socialism and communism. He argued that the citizens of Paris had shown that the existing state could not be utilised in order to realise the revolutionary transformation of society and that democracy was integral to the prospects of advancing the prospects of communism.

Engels also argued that the progress of German Social Democracy had indicated that the process of socialist transition had been modified and that it was possible to utilise universal suffrage as an instrument of revolutionary change. This also not the imposition of dogma onto the class struggle and instead represented a process of theoretical reflection upon what was occurring and the elaboration of perspectives based on actual developments within the economy and political system. The point is if the actual lessons of the class struggle had been different then the conception of the strategy and tactics of the struggle for communism would also have been developed in a different manner. In this context Marx and Engels would consider that it was an idealist error to try and impose principles onto the class struggle. This is why they argued various German Left Hegelians were wrong to conceive of historical development in terms of the elaboration of philosophical principles such as the role of spirit that could not actually be related to the role of material and social processes. Instead they argued that the conflict of the productive forces with the existing relations of production was how the class struggle could be understood and articulated and so the question of progress in the class struggle was based on the intensification of contradictions that were actually located within social reality and were not the invention of principles that were imposed by intellectuals from outside the class struggle. Hence the conception of socialism originating from outside the class struggle is only true for the beginning of the development of socialism as a doctrine. Socialism was originally conceived as a model of a future society that had little relation to the actual progress of the class struggle and therefore could only be envisaged as being realised by the action of intellectuals. But the actual advance of socialism as a theory meant that became closer to the actual practice of the mass movement.

The aim of Marx and Engels was to bring about the interaction of the theory of socialism with the aspirations of the mass movement so that the practice of class struggle became socialist in inspiration. This is why they would only conceive of the origins of socialism from the outside of the class struggle as being true for the beginnings of modern socialism when the doctrine was being developed by small organisations and parties. The very development of socialism as a theory would promote the possibility for it to become the inspiration for the advance of class struggle and the prospect of communism. In this context it could also be argued that the origin of Russian Marxism from outside the class struggle was an accurate comment about its beginnings. However the very progress of Russian Marxism meant that it interacted with the mass movement and influenced the organisations of the working class in a socialist manner. The working class began to produce intellectuals who had absorbed the ideas of Marxism and Marxist parties established an organised relation to the working class. Consequently at a certain point in the 20th century it was no longer true to suggest that Russian Marxism originated from outside the working class and instead its influence was connected to the development of the class struggle and the Russian workers adopted the Marxist perspective of the overthrow of the Russian autocracy. However this process of interaction of Marxism and the mass movement is not established within contemporary capitalism. On the one hand we have marginal and isolated groups and on the other hand we have mass organisations that could generate potential mass struggle. It is also necessary to accept that the core values of Marxism and the mass organisations is different and the latter are distrustful of the revolutionary principles of Marxism and do not support the prospect of the social transformation of society. Instead moral protest about the inequality of capitalism represents a popular mood but the aim of communism is treated with distrust and considered to represent an alternative power system that is not wanted. In this unfavourable situation some of the forces of Marxism have distanced themselves from their traditional goals of communism and instead concentrate upon reforms and obtaining concessions from the government.

In other words intransigent Marxism has been reduced in significance and lacks any organic relation to the mass movement. It is effectively outside the class struggle and the advocacy of Marxism is considered to be an external and alien imposition by the various activists of the mass movement. Often the very people interested in Marxism do not support its revolutionary message and seek to transform Marxism into a doctrine that is more compatible to the process of adapting to capitalism. In this context the principled supporters of Marxism have no alternative than to effectively begin to propagate their message from outside the class struggle. The immense task is to try and convince the mass movement of the relevance and importance of Marxism as a guide to political activity. This means actually convincing people that there is a class struggle and that the role of Marxism is integral to the prospect of making progress in the class struggle. Success in this task will not be easy given the levels of scepticism about Marxism because of the influence of the view that Marxism is outdated and the justification of totalitarian forms of society. However Marxism has one important advantage because the various other standpoints such as moral protest and trade union militancy do not express a convincing perspective that can generate success. Marxism is still the most important programmatic guide to action and can outline powerful arguments as to why the crisis of capitalism cannot be resolved by a process of conciliation between the forces of capital and labour. Hence Marxism can argue that the defensive strategy of class compromise has many limitations and that the prospect to resolve the austerity situation in favour of the working class can only be brought about by revolutionary transformation. Unfortunately this strategic superiority of Marxism is presently obscured by the apparent historical exhaustion of Marxism and it seems to represent a doctrine that is discredited rather than relevant for the class struggle. This is why Marxism can only renew its previous importance from a starting point that seems to be outside of the class struggle. The initial task will be to reassert its importance and establish an organic relation to the mass movement. But this prospect cannot be realised by the dilution of revolutionary principles and instead it is revolutionary Marxism that has to be made relevant. This is a very difficult task given the mass movement has never been more hostile to the core values of Marxism.

Lenin argues that we should not expect that the economic struggle will somehow result in a political struggle that is adequate to the tasks advocated by Social Democracy. The actual relation of economic and political struggle is to create trade unionist politics that is dominated by bourgeois ideology and its related limitations. This is because bourgeois ideology is historically durable and influential and so the elementary movement of the working class tends to adopt a standpoint that is based on politics that is not revolutionary. This means the economic struggle does not naturally result in politics that is Social Democratic. Instead Social Democracy has to intervene in order to increase the influence of Social Democratic politics and to reduce the influence of trade union politics: “Very often the economic struggle of the workers is tied (although not inextricably) to a bourgeois politics, to a clerical politics and so on….if we understand by ‘politics’ a trade-unionist politics – the general striving of all workers to obtain from the government that or that measure aimed against the misfortunes inherent in their position but not as yet the aimed at eliminating that position, that is, not at annihilating the subordination of labour to capital.”(p713).

This argument of Lenin seems to be historically accurate in that the mass economic struggles of the working class that are without hegemonic Social Democratic influence tend to promote the limitations of trade union politics and the related influence of bourgeois ideology. This means that there is no inherent tendency for these struggles to become political struggles that challenge the system and become the dynamic for the revolutionary transformation of society. If economic struggles are to acquire a political and revolutionary dynamic they will have to become consciously influenced by Marxism and so the mass movement will then become socialist in inspiration. However it is an illusion to expect that the mass movement will acquire a socialist character in a spontaneous manner and as a result of an inner process of development and dynamism. This is why it is wrong to conceive of the economic struggle becoming the political struggle in a spontaneous manner instead we have to establish the political conditions in which this relation can be established. Lenin was to modify his standpoint in the 1905 revolution when he recognised that the economic struggle could acquire revolutionary dimensions. In periods of general unrest and discontent the general outcome of economic struggle could be transformed and promote the very issue of the domination of capital or labour. It could also be argued that in other historical periods such as France in the 1930’s and 1968 the economic grievances of the working class acquired political dimensions. The major political problem was the limitation of political organisation and the complexity of the relation between party and class. However it could be argued that in periods of political stability the economic struggle does not go beyond the limitations of bourgeois and reformist politics because of the hegemonic influence of the trade unions. Only in exceptional periods in very particular countries does the economic struggle acquire political dimensions that generate the prospect of revolutionary possibilities. Hence it would seem that Lenin was correct to argue that the conscious role of Marxism is crucial to transforming this spontaneous adherence of the mass organisations of the working class to bourgeois and reformist politics. However the situation has been complicated by the role of Stalinism that argues for revolutionary aims in reformist terms and the lack of influence of principled Marxism. Consequently the importance of the intervention of a Marxist party has been obscured by this complex political situation and because of the durability of the influence of trade union politics. Taking into account these complications it is possible to argue that under the most general conditions the economic struggle will not become a political struggle without conscious revolutionary intervention. Instead the economic struggle will remain limited by the role of the trade union bureaucracy and so will be of a reformist character as Lenin suggested.

However does this mean that the economic struggle is effectively without political significance? In other words is the strategic problem located with the very role of economic struggle or with the influence of the trade union bureaucracy and trade union politics? This seems to be the question that is not addressed or answered by Lenin. Hence he argues that it is the very character of economic struggle that means it is naturally reformist and based upon adaptation to the requirements of capitalism, and he also insists that the important problem is the influence of trade union politics. The important point is: what is the relation between these two aspects and which is of most causal importance? I would argue that the role of the trade union bureaucracy is what establishes that the economic struggle does not become political struggle and instead realises reforms such as a shorter working day and higher wages. This means that economic struggle is not inherently reformist and therefore represents the prospect to become political struggle and a challenge to the interests of capital. For example the struggle to achieve workers control of production is an economic demand that challenges the domination of capital within the social relations of production and so has a political dynamic to generate struggle against the political domination of capital within society and the superstructure. It could also be argued that even demands such as a shorter working day can acquire these political dimensions. In other words depending on the character of the economic demand it can result in political struggle that challenges the system and poses the prospect of its overthrow. However the general influence of the trade union bureaucracy will act to limit the possibility for economic struggle to become a political struggle with revolutionary dimensions. This was shown in the 1926 general strike in the UK when the strike to support the miners threatened to become a challenge to the state power of the capitalist class. It was this possibility that led the TUC to call off the strike. Consequently the very political possibilities of economic demands would seem to suggest that one of the important roles of Marxism is to argue for the very transformation of economic struggles into a political struggle. It cannot be dogmatically asserted that economic struggle can never become a political and revolutionary struggle instead this prospect depends upon the type of demand being raised and the level of influence of Marxism on the class struggle.

In present conditions the prospect of the economic struggle becoming a political struggle seems to be very remote but this is because of the ideological hegemony of the trade union bureaucracy and the marginalised situation of Marxism. The trade union bureaucracy is doing everything in its power to ensure that demands are limited to the context of negotiating stances concerning pensions and wages and the question of opposing the austerity measures in general is excluded from its point of reference. This means they are deliberately and consciously trying to deny the possibility that the economic struggle can become a political struggle. Demagogic reference to the possibility of a general strike is actually utilised in order to extract concessions from the government rather than being a serious option. The various reformist Marxists accommodate to this situation by posing as the most militant defenders of the interests of the working class and so effectively rejecting the importance of the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society and the prospect of communism. They argue like the Economists that the class struggle will realise its own interests because of its spontaneous dynamic and progressive logic. One of the important tasks of principled Marxism is to argue that the domination of the trade union bureaucracy means that the economic struggle will not become a political struggle. Hence we need to develop a different leadership of the mass movement if the potential for the economic struggle to become a political struggle is to be realised. This means arguing that the period of defensive strategies based on class compromise is over and that it is important to understand that the government can no longer grant concessions because of the serious economic situation. Consequently without the growing influence of Marxism the illusions that the economic struggle is sufficient in and of itself to realise the interests and demands of the working class will still be hegemonic and the ultimate result of this situation will be defeat. This means the continued domination of the trade union bureaucracy cannot realise victory in the economic struggle because its strategy of compromise is anachronistic in this situation of the intensification of class contradictions. However the trade union leadership remain dominant because activists are presently content with the approach of moral protest rather than developing a challenge to the economic and state power of capitalism.

In order to transform this situation one of the tasks of Marxism is to insist that the economic struggle can only realise its potential by becoming a political struggle. The task of obtaining the withdrawal of the austerity measures is about challenging the state power of the ruling class and therefore bringing about the revolutionary transformation of society. However the credibility of this approach means to diminish the influence of the trade union bureaucracy and to bring about a transformation of the structures of the trade unions. The demise of the strategy of class collaboration means to organisationally restructure the unions. This is an immense task but it is one that is required by all militant class struggle. For example Dave Douglas outlined how the conduct of strikes during the Miners strike of 1984-85 became organised by rank and file organisations. This type of organisation was required because the strike raised the important issues of state power and therefore this transition from economic to political struggle led to the effective restructuring of the leadership of the union. This process will be required in a generalised manner if the unions are to be adequate to the tasks of opposing the present austerity measures of the government. The Union leadership tries to suggest that the government is acting in a political manner whilst they are merely acting to economically defend the interests of their members. This is the usual argument that has become completely inadequate in the present period. What is being denied is the effective connection between the economic and political. The austerity strategy of the government is a deliberate attempt to utilise state power in order to lower the material standards of working people. In order to respond the trade unions are implicitly suggesting the wisdom of an alternative economic strategy. It is impossible to limit the demands to technical economic criteria. Hence even on the terms of the trade union bureaucracy they are effectively advocating the transformation of the economic struggle into a political struggle. However they attempt to repress the very logic of their own standpoint by trying to limit themselves to discussion with the government of a few key economic aspects. It is the role of Marxism to make explicit the repressed political aspects of the economic struggle.

The problem for Marxism is the legacy of the past which is the fact of its isolation and the discrediting of its core values. The task of ending this isolation is about proposing a strategy that can transform the economic struggle into a political struggle against the capitalist system. In this context Lenin’s scepticism that the economic struggle cannot become a political struggle is not helpful and is an expression of the situation under Tsarism and when the central task was the overthrow of the autocracy. However the present austerity measures indicate that the economic is political and so the economic struggle can become a political struggle. However the reformist influence of the trade union bureaucracy outlined by Lenin is still important for understanding why the economic struggle does not become the political struggle. We have to undermine this influence if the economic struggle can express its potential to become a political struggle.

Lenin argues that there are two basic senses in which we can argue that the mass movement determines the strategy of Marxism. The choices are firstly that the mass movement dictates the tasks on the basis of the limitations of spontaneity, or secondly that Social Democracy is able to influence and intervene: “There can be no disputing that the mass movement is indeed the most important phenomenon. But the question is: what do we mean when we say that this mass movement ‘determines tasks’? There are two possibilities: either in the sense of kow-towing before the stikhiinost of this movement, that is reducing the role of Social Democracy down to a simple servicing of the workers movement as such…… or in the sense that the mass movement puts before us new theoretical, political and organisational tasks, much more complicated than those found satisfactory in the period before the emergence of the mass movement.”(p715) The first option means that Marxism does not act to develop an understanding of what the mass movement should do and instead it is assumed that the very emergence of the mass movement resolves any issues about political leadership. It is assumed that the mass movement will create a dynamic of leadership, sense of strategy and understanding of the appropriate tasks of the class struggle. However the result of this reasoning is to effectively deny the priority of the class struggle which is the overthrow of the autocracy and instead concentrate on the economic struggle. In contrast Social Democracy should be concerned to provide advice to the mass movement concerning its aims and understanding about how it can develop. The approach of the Economists is to abdicate with regards to the role of leadership and instead assume the mass movement can advance without the effective intervention of Social Democracy.

It could be argued that Lenin’s standpoint has been historically vindicated by the historical experience of the class struggle. In most situations the development of the class struggle without the important intervention and influence of Marxism has resulted in the domination of a trade union and reformist politics. This has meant the mass movement in and of itself has only generated revolutionary type politics in the most exceptional circumstances and therefore it could be reasonably argued that the mass movement has not inherently promoted a strategic wisdom that is able to dispense with the role of Marxism and its organised expression. Hence the mass movement cannot through its own dynamism establish a sense of its tasks and instead requires a relationship with Marxism in order to develop an adequate perspective that can advance the class struggle to a successful conclusion. Without the important role of Marxism the result has been the continuation of capitalism and the mass movement has not been able to articulate its interests in a manner that are distinct from the requirements of capital. However Lenin is not clear about whether this need for revolutionary intervention means that the mass movement is dictated to by the Marxist party, or alternatively are we actually conceiving a situation based on the interaction of the party and class? In other words does the actual actions of the mass movement provide the actual inspiration for the role of Marxism, and therefore does Marxism articulate what the mass movement is promoting and making possible? Hence Marxism theoretically elaborates what is being made apparent and probable by the spontaneous actions of the mass movement. In this context Lenin would be one-sided if he is arguing that the party externally imposes its aims and tasks onto the role of the mass movement. Instead the relationship between class and party is more interactive and the party extracts and makes accessible what the mass movement is spontaneously striving to achieve. This methodology was apparent in 1917 when Lenin called for All Power to the Soviets. This slogan and perspective would not have made sense if the working class was not already organising within the Soviets and they had become rival mass organisations that challenged the political power of the government. Lenin was only articulating the possibilities of the Soviets and outlining their potential in relation to actual developments. However the role of the party was vital in order to make explicit what was already implicit in the actions of the mass movement. The result was the interaction of the party and class and the revolutionary overthrow of the government.

The point is that the mass movement is based on the contradictory tendencies between an inclination to adapt to the influences of the trade union bureaucracy and an alternative impulse to support the opposite pole of attraction represented by Marxism. Most of the time the mass movement supports the trade union leadership but a situation can develop in which the views of Marxism become influential. The role of Marxism is to undermine the influence of the trade union bureaucracy within the mass movement and to provide an alternative in terms of a revolutionary strategy. Presently the trade union bureaucracy is ideologically hegemonic and the principles of revolutionary Marxism are discredited and unpopular. However the austerity measures of the government represent the standpoint that the economic crisis can only be resolved at the expense of working people and the trade union leadership has no valid policy alternative because reformism is not possible in this situation. The objective conditions favour the progress of Marxism but this does not mean that Marxism will actually advance because it may articulate its ideas in a manner that is not skilled and so repel people from Marxism. It would be an illusion to consider that the intensification of the class struggle will automatically result in new support for Marxism. This type of determinism is not a substitute for the necessity for Marxists to act efficiently in this situation and the skill of Marxist propaganda is of vital importance in relation to whether Marxism can rival the ideological influence of the trade union bureaucracy.

If the influence of Marxism does not progress in this situation we can agree with Lenin that the spontaneous character of the mass movement will not resolve issues of strategy and leadership. The role of Marxism is to generate a sense of purpose into the mass movement and to provide an orientation concerning how to advance to higher levels of struggle. In contrast the trade union bureaucracy can only provide a strategy based on vacillation and retreat, and the result will be to disperse the militant strength of the mass movement. The legacy of the past and inertia is presently undermining the influence of Marxism but the actual demands of the class struggle will promote the conditions for Marxism to develop greater support. But the present fragmentation of Marxism is an additional factor that restricts the increase of influence of Marxism. Hence it would be wrong to solely concentrate on what is happening with the mass movement and instead it is necessary to recognise what Marxism has to do internally in order to facilitate its prospects of renewal and regeneration. In addition the scepticism about the prospects of success of the mass movement is very influential and it would appear that only the ruling class is able to project a sense of unity. How Marxists react to this situation is vital. If Marxism can develop theoretical understanding the prospects for the mass movement to advance will have been promoted. But the justification of dogma or opportunism will mean that the spontaneous ideology of the mass movement will not be challenged. Marxism has actually to regain a sense of its own importance and its historical vocation if the mass movement is to be able to overcome its reformist limitations.

Lenin argues that the Economists try to contrast tactics as a process of growth to the rigid adherence to tactics of the plan that is advocated by the supporters of Iskra. What this means is that the Economists underestimate the importance of the conscious element of the role of the party and so underestimate both purpose and theory. Instead they try to argue that tactics are a natural supplement to the objective development of the class struggle based on the role of spontaneity and so ignore the experiences of the actual history of the role of Marxism within the class struggle. Marxism has always been about the conflict between different tactics that emphasise conflicting conceptions of planning and perspectives. Hence the view that the class struggle creates its own ideal and natural tactics is an illusion that is based on the overestimation of the importance of spontaneity and the underestimation of the conscious intervention of Marxism into the class struggle. The role of planning is to influence and guide the actual development of the class struggle so that it can realise its potential and the alternative is the rejection of planning in the name of the dynamism of spontaneity and the view that the mass movement creates its own tactics. The actual result of this standpoint would be to undermine the development of the struggle and to impose backward tactics that cannot advance the struggle against Tsarism.

This controversy is important in relation to the possibility for struggle against the austerity measures of the government. One influential view is that the struggle will create its own sense of tactics because of the momentum of the mass movement and the result will be an instinctive knowledge of what is possible and feasible. Hence it would be artificial and counterproductive to try and impose a strategy onto the mass movement, or a diversion from what is necessary in order to realise progress. We should allow the mass movement to create its own perspectives in relation to its natural development and potential. This approach has essentially been supported by the reformist Marxists who would argue that it is unrealistic and sectarian to try and impose Marxist core values and principles onto the struggle and instead we should try and argue for what is practical and realistic in terms of the process of development of the opposition to the austerity measures. What seems to be suggested is that leadership, policy and perspectives will be generated by the struggle and the role of Marxism is to encourage this process and not to impose a false strategy that will not develop mass support. The problem with this standpoint is that it effectively does not challenge the leadership and strategy of the trade union leaders. The defensive strategy of the trade union leaders is not opposed by the alternative of a different strategy and the result is that the limitations of the mass movement are accommodated to and Marxism becomes a support organisation to the existing forms of action. This means Marxism becomes the ideological articulation of the interests of the trade union bureaucracy rather than being an audacious attempt to promote the potential of mass struggle.

In other words the attempt to locate what is ideal and natural forms of struggle in terms of defining tactics as a process of growth is an illusion. The result of this illusion is opportunism and accommodation to the role of the trade union bureaucracy. Hence the outcome of this tactical approach is not to promote the potential of mass struggle and instead to accommodate to its spontaneous limitations. Lenin would argue that the alternative is represented by the conception of tactics as planning. The party should advocate a definite strategy in order to obtain support for this strategy within the mass movement. In the Russian context this means generating support for the perspective of the overthrow of the autocracy and the mass movement is likely to adhere to this aim because it represents the expression of the process of development of the mass movement. However the problem with Lenin’s approach is whether he is suggesting the party should exclusively decide what expresses tactics as planning, or instead is he arguing that the development of the plan is based on the interaction of the party and class? The impression he generally provides is that the party acts as the conscious provider of the plan and the class attempts to implement this plan. This is because the alternative of the spontaneous development of the class struggle results in a form of trade union politics that has a tendency towards class compromise. However his approach is one sided because if the mass movement did not have any tendencies tending towards support for the standpoint of Marxism the prospect of the interaction of Marxism with the class would be inconceivable. Hence we can argue that Marxism represents strategic advice to a mass movement that is becoming favourably inclined towards the acceptance of this advice. But the important influence of the trade union bureaucracy also represents the ideological basis for rejection of this advice and the continuation of the approach of class compromise. Hence there is a struggle between Marxism and the trade union bureaucracy for hegemonic influence within the working class. The very possibility of Marxism to develop hegemony is connected to its ability to relate to the aspirations of the working class and to present these aspirations in strategic form as an indication of the striving for an alternative future. Consequently the view that the party can dictate to the class what should be tactics and a plan for change is nonsensical because the only possible relation is that based on voluntary support by the class of the strategic approach of Marxism. In that sense the approach of tactics as a plan still has a natural relation to the possible development of the class struggle. This means that tactics as a plan is not inherently opposed to the conception of tactics as a process of growth of the class struggle. Success at the level of strategy represents the very prospect of the interaction of tactics as a plan – which has originated from Marxism – with the process of growth of the class struggle.

Consequently there are two one sided standpoints. The first is represented by the Economists who favourably contrast tactics as process with the apparent artificial standpoint of tactics as plan. This underestimates the role of the conscious, purpose and the Marxist organisation. But the other one sided view is represented by Lenin who differentiates tactics as plan from tactics as growth and argues that the latter is inferior and an expression of spontaneous immaturity and so the only principled basis of strategy is that of tactics as plan. These rigid views ignore the importance of interaction and the fact that the very success of tactics as plan is based on the receptiveness of the mass movement. If the mass movement is not inclined to support tactics as plan then the approach of tactics as plan will be a failure. Hence if tactics as plan is to be successful it is necessary for the Marxists to recognise what is popular and important in the class struggle and to connect these aspects with the perspective of the aim of communism. The very development of the class struggle will indicate how tactics as plan can be elaborated. But if tactics as plan is indifferent to the aspirations of the mass movement its strategy will be unsuccessful and be conceived as an imposition onto the class struggle rather than an expression of its organic possibilities.

One example of the relation of tactics as plan with tactics as growth is provided by the Manifesto of A World to Win. They recognise that people are presently receptive to discussion about how progress can be made in the struggle against the austerity measures. Hence they argue that the development of the mass struggle against austerity measures requires the formation of Peoples Assemblies that can advance the organisation and capacity to establish the perspectives of the mass movement. The Peoples Assemblies would represent the aim of developing an alternative to the situation of austerity and indicate what is necessary in order to realise success in the struggle. This is an expression of tactics as planning relating to tactics as growth and recognising that the present mood of uncertainty can be overcome by the formation of organisational forms that enable people to develop ideas about how opposition can be advanced and alternatives generated. If the trade union bureaucracy remains ideologically hegemonic then the approach of the Peoples Assemblies will not become popular and successful. Instead the approach of negotiation will remain dominant and the issue of the development of an alternative type of society will be effectively rejected. This means that Marxism has to engage in ideological struggle if the strategies they advocate are to become popular. The error of the Economists was to suggest that the class struggle in and of itself would realise a necessary and principled strategy, or that tactics as growth would be the necessary outcome of the role of a mass movement. In actuality the very potential of the mass movement in terms of tactics as growth is obscured by the role of the trade union bureaucracy and so the realisation of the possibilities of tactics as growth is connected to a struggle of Marxism with the trade union leaders. The success of Marxism in this struggle will create the political conditions to unite tactics as a plan with tactics as growth. In relation to the above this will mean that ‘A World to Win’ will be able to develop mass support for Peoples Assemblies. The formation of Peoples Assemblies will be an alternative to the trade union tactics of negotiation and instead develop the democratic and popular character of a challenge to the domination of capital within society. This process will not be abstracted from the role of the mass movement but instead the mass movement will realise its potential in the form of the creation of Peoples Assemblies.

If Lenin’s approach was to be carried to its extreme it would mean the realisation of a party led revolution. The mass movement would accept a plan devised by the party and therefore implemented in practice. However the actual Russian Revolution was based on the interaction of tactics as plan with tactics as growth. The very actions of the mass movement provided theoretical inspiration for the party and it could be argued that without this dynamism of the mass movement the revolution would have been impossible. Consequently the superiority of his argument was in refuting the illusions of the Economists that the class struggle naturally in relation to its own growth provided a proper sense of principles and strategic growth. Without the influence of Marxism the mass movement was likely to be dominated by trade union politics. But Lenin was also wrong when he seemed to be suggesting that the party did not need to listen to the mass movement, and that lessons were not provided by the actual development of the class struggle. In contrast to that rigidity the actual art of strategy was realised by the interaction of tactics as plan with tactics as growth. The mass movement did have impulses that represented revolutionary striving and this has to be acknowledged in a plan that was sensitive to the aspirations of mass struggle. Hence Lenin’s criticism of the role of spontaneity was too absolute and dogmatic. The approach of Luxemburg was superior who tried to establish an understanding of the process of interaction of spontaneity with organisation. This dynamic was present in the revolution of 1905 and caused Lenin to modify his standpoint. But the error of the Economists to be uncritical of the mass movement is being repeated in relation to the present and so Lenin’s criticisms of this standpoint are still appropriate and timely. However in repeating Lenin’s views we should also not be uncritical of the limitations in his own standpoint and be aware of the problem of elitism in his approach. Nevertheless the failure to absorb the views of Lenin about the Economists means that many contemporary Marxists are failing to provide strategic advice to the mass movement. The result is that the trade union leadership are not being effectively challenged. Hence the tempo and dynamic of the mass struggle follows the logic of trade union politics.

Lenin argues that the logic of the Economists is to act as the tail of the mass movement. The stance that the mass movement produces its own politics and perspectives means that the result is an uncritical attitude that cannot provide leadership. Instead the approach that one should not criticise the spontaneous development of the class struggle represents an approach of accommodation that is incapable of adopting an independent attitude towards the mass movement: “And you have to admit that people who have definitely decided always to follow after the movement as its tail are absolutely and for all time guaranteed against ‘underestimation of the stikhiinyi element of development.”(p721) This approach does not recognise the dialectical relation between Social Democracy and the mass movement. The more that the spontaneous dynamism of the mass movement develops the more urgent is the role of Social Democracy to provide leadership and purpose to this struggle: “The greater is the stikhiinyi upsurge of the masses and the wider becomes the movement, so much the more does the demand increase for a mass of purposiveness in the theoretical, the political and the organisational work of Social Democracy.”(p721) The development of the mass movement increases the actual urgency and importance of Social Democratic intervention and therefore rejects a passive standpoint and uncritical accommodation to the struggle. The role of Social democracy is not to allow the struggle to acquire its own natural evolution and instead to intervene in order to enhance the purpose and consciousness of the struggle. Primarily this means orientating the economic struggle towards the political task of the overthrow of the autocracy.

The reformist Marxists would tend to argue that this approach of Lenin is dictated by the requirements of the struggle against the autocracy and so is outdated in the present context. The prevailing view is that the economic struggle will acquire the necessary political dimensions and the aspect of spontaneity will be sufficient for the development of the appropriate demands for the progress of the mass movement. Hence the effective tailing of the movement is conceived as principled and defined as what is to be expected at the given moment in time. It would be sectarian to impose impossible expectations on a movement that is only just beginning and the potential of the struggle cannot be anticipated in advance of an actual process of development. These points are not completely invalid. At present we have a mood of discontent but organised mass struggle has not properly begun and so it is very complicated to predict what will happen. It is still possible that the austerity measures will be implemented without the development of effective resistance. However the principled approach with regards to this complicated situation is not to justify a passive stance that is uncritical towards the spontaneous dynamics of the mass movement. We cannot assume a posture of contemplation and the related view that the struggle will assume its own natural growth and logic of inherent development. It is quite possible that the ideological domination of the trade union bureaucracy will repress the prospect of struggle. This is why the intervention of Marxism is vital in order to defend a strategy that justifies mass action and to criticise the passivity of the trade union bureaucracy. Without this type of political intervention Marxists become the accomplices of the trade union leaders and so tacitly accept the failure to promote mass struggle. Hence the role of tailing the struggle is actually to defend the very failure of the trade union leaders to mobilise working people in opposition to the austerity measures. The only basis to promote the development of an effective mass movement is to provide a principled strategy and to support the formation of an alternative leadership.

However it is necessary to differ from Lenin’s apparent conclusion that the major problem is with the role of spontaneity. In this context it is necessary to differentiate between the Economist defending spontaneity from the actual role of spontaneity. The Economist justification of spontaneity results in the underestimation of the tasks of leadership and conscious intervention in struggles and so upholds the tailing of the mass movement. The result is that the Economists uphold an opportunist conception of leadership and strategy. On the other hand the spontaneous development of the mass struggle can result in an effective challenge against the system and the formation of new organisations that represent the alternative power of the working class. The role of Marxism is to encourage the development of this type of spontaneity. Consequently we can understand that the reactionary role of the Economists is that they accommodate to spontaneity at its lowest levels of development and are actual mistrustful of the realisation of the potential of spontaneous struggle. But Lenin is also mistrustful of spontaneity because of its relation to trade union politics and so he conceives of the relation of spontaneity to organisation in the most dogmatic manner. In other words the only principled relation he can conceive of is one in which organisation completely dominates the role of spontaneity. He does not consider that the role of organisation may be to promote the potential of spontaneity and instead the task is about organisation transforming spontaneity into something that is under its auspices. He does not recognise that the trade union politics he so dislikes is also about organisation repressing and controlling the forces of spontaneity. The negative dialectic of spontaneity is that its expression can result in a situation in which its very potential is restricted by the role of the trade union leadership. The role of Marxism should be to promote spontaneity and so overcome the limitations imposed by the trade union bureaucracy but instead Lenin proposes that a form of restrictive organisation should replace one other form of restrictive organisation. Hence the domination of the class by the trade union bureaucracy is replaced by the domination of the party. In both instances the actual possibilities of spontaneity are repressed.

Rosa Luxemburg also argued against the party and trade union bureaucracy acting together in order to repress the potential of spontaneity. He argument was not against the role of organisation but rather a principled party would reject the limitations imposed on the working class by the trade unions. Consequently the growing opportunism of German Social Democracy was expressed by its toleration of the organisational domination of the trade union leadership over the working class. Lenin was motivated by revolutionary principles and his concern was how to advance the overthrow of the autocracy. He could envisage a situation in which trade union politics undermined the prospect of the revolutionary overthrow of the autocracy. But his alternative was not to advocate the development of the importance of spontaneity and instead he argued for limitations imposed on spontaneity which he conflated with the influence of the Economists and the role of the trade union bureaucracy. This was a political mistake and resulted in the conception of party led revolution. The result was an underestimation of the importance of the Soviets in the 1905 revolution because they were the outcome of spontaneous struggle that occurred without the prior approval of the party. In contrast Trotsky was involved in the activity of the Soviets because he did not share the Bolshevik conception of the relation of spontaneity to organisation. He understood that it was the very development of the spontaneous aspect of the class struggle that most effectively refuted the Economist view that the working class should abdicate the political struggle against Tsarism. The very development of the Soviets indicated that the views of the Economists had become anachronistic.

However Lenin’s own conception of the relation between the party and class was found to be wanting in 1905. He was vindicated in terms of the fact that the party should seek to influence the spontaneous struggle but his overall mistrust of spontaneity was problematic. The very influence of Social Democracy within the working class had encouraged the workers to act in a revolutionary manner and so the role of spontaneity was not necessarily to be the supplement of reformist politics. But Lenin did not modify his world view of WITBD in 1905 rather he ignored the importance of spontaneity and its expression in the form of Soviets. Instead he advocated in a dogmatic manner the formation of a revolutionary regime of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasants and did not articulate the relation of this regime to the role of the Soviets. In contrast Luxemburg was articulating the importance of the mass strike and elaborating its relation to the prospects for the overthrow of the autocracy. She was able to indicate how the conception of the relation between the economic struggle and the political struggle could be interpreted in a principled rather than opportunist manner. The superiority of Luxemburg in 1905 does not necessarily mean that her criticisms of WITBD were actually profound and precise. Indeed the significance of the various criticism of Lenin by his Marxist opponents within Menshevism is not relevant to the task of making a profound criticism of WITBD. The most important point is that the actual experience of the 1905 revolution refuted the standpoint of WITBD. It was this revolution that indicated that Lenin’s approach had been one-sided in 1902. But we can also argue that understanding the problems of the development of the mass struggle in the recent period can be advanced by applying the views of WITBD. Lenin outlined the importance of revolutionary theory and organisation to the task of developing the class struggle. This approach can be of vital importance in a situation in which the limitations of spontaneity have become more apparent and the role of Marxism is acquiring crucial dimensions.