THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST ALLIANCE PROGRAMME FOR THE CRISIS

SECTION ONE - INTRODUCTION

It is a common misconception that programme should primarily be a guide to action. Instead of this dogmatic view of programme there are many different types and each of them are historically specific and have a particular view of aims and tasks. The most famous of all programmes was the Communist Manifesto and it concentrated upon an analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the importance of the revolutionary transformation of society. Hence the strategic aspects of programme were outlined in Marx’s writings about the 1848 revolution. Later programmes like that of the 1919 Russian Communist Party outlined how the economic and political situation had changed since the time of Marx and justified the Russian revolution as the beginning of world revolution. The importance of strategic demands was left to the newly formed Communist International. Trotsky developed a critique of the 1928 Programme of the Communist International and argued that its defence of socialism in one country was the justification of an increasingly opportunist conception of strategy and tactics. He called for an alternative programme of action and a renewed emphasis on the importance of world revolution. This perceptive criticism was codified in his 1938 Transitional Programme that argued the original Communist International conception of the epoch as that of wars and revolutions was still valid and should be reaffirmed. It was also necessary to develop a programme of action that would correspond to this understanding. The result was a collection of transitional demands that connected the immediate aspirations of the working class to the struggle for revolution and communism.

However the outcome of the Second World War did not realise Trotsky’s perspective. What occurred was the strengthening of the United States and the Soviet Union and the effective development of the cold war system. The Fourth International failed to recognise these changes and did not elaborate a new programme for a changing situation. Instead the various groupings claiming to be the Fourth International have tended to dogmatically claim the Transitional Programme was still valid and so have minimised the importance of new developments. One of the disappointments in this regard was the Programme of Workers Power called the Transitional Manifesto. They called for Programmatic re-elaboration and yet the result was similar to the Transitional Programme and did not contain any theoretical innovation and advance. This meant they failed to define the differences between the inter-war period and the post-war period and did not articulate the significance of the demise of Stalinism. The transitional Manifesto also failed to address the most important theoretical question of the recent period which concerned whether the working class is still capable of being revolutionary. In contrast to this failure the DSA will try to develop a programme that addresses the most important questions since the post-war period and yet is also a programme for today. We recognise that the various programmes that are effectively based on the inter-war period are antiquated and need t be replaced by a more creative understanding of the present situation. Only in this sense can we articulate the aims and tasks of communism in a manner that is not dogmatic and which is based on an understanding of the contemporary class struggle.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COLD WAR

The outcome of the Second World War consolidated the economic and social power of capitalism and Stalinism. On the one hand the instability of inter-imperialist conflict was effectively ended and replaced by the unity of the various national elements of world capitalism under the hegemony of American imperialism. This situation enabled a prolonged boom to occur based on the growth of international trade and what became the imperialist camp was united against a common antagonist which was the Soviet Union. In this situation the countries of developed capitalism could provide significant material advances for the working class and so the ideological view that capitalism was superior to socialism could acquire credibility. The popularity that the USSR had acquired in a period of crisis and poverty was undermined. Instead the USA seemed to be winning the Cold war and the claim of the USSR that it was building communism was generally considered an empty boast and was soon discredited within the USSR itself. In this period the strength of reformism was impressive because of the apparent success of Keynesian demand management and so the perspective of war and revolution was no longer true. War had become peripheral to capitalism and was no longer integral to the prospect of its further development. However the Fourth International used the situation of the Cold War in order to modify and not revise their pre war perspective of wars and revolutions. It was argued that the cold war would result in the outbreak of actual military conflict and the prospect of a form of international revolution would follow. This was a dogmatic claim and based on adherence to the perspectives of the Transitional Programme rather than a realistic analysis of the post-war situation. What was not understood was that both the USA and USSR would not gain from nuclear war and instead their domination was based on the continuation of peaceful conflict.

On the other hand the USSR had increased its power through conquest of Eastern Europe and this was an indication that Trotsky’s view that the Soviet bureaucracy represented a transitional regime was discredited by events. The prospect of the formation of a new ruling class had to be contemplated. Instead of this type of theoretical development the USSR was supported in the Cold War in terms of the defence of the nationalised economy against the aggression of imperialism. The fact of a cold war system that acted to oppose international proletarian revolution was not recognised. Instead new developments were adapted to old forms of analysis and not related to the development of a new theory of the domination of capitalism and Stalinism. Instead this process was recognised in a pessimistic manner by the various intellectuals of the Frankfurt school. Herbert Marcuse argued that the character of alienation and did not necessarily promote discontent with capitalism within the working class. This view was a formidable challenge to the approach of Marxism but it was not effectively answered by the Trotskyists who were content to repeat past truisms and argued that the coming crisis of capitalism would renew the revolutionary character of the working class. The fact that the USA was economically and politically dominant in the Cold war was not answered in terms of an elaboration of the character of the cold war system and what this meant for the perspectives of international revolution.

It was the4 actual mass action of the working class that partially resolved the crisis of Trotskyism. The general strike of the French workers in 1968, which followed the rebellion of the Hungarian workers in 1956, and the formation of workers councils showed that in practice the working class was still capable of revolutionary type actions. The period boom was also being replaced by stagnation and inflation and indicated that the period of crisis had not been overcome. The working class was being radicalised by this situation and militant action occurred in Italy and the UK, and ultimately a new revolution developed in Portugal. This process indicated that the working class was not ultimately reconciled to the domination of capitalism and was capable of acting to express its discontent with the domination of capital over labour. The Soviet Union also took advantage of the American defeat in Vietnam in order to expand in Africa and so the cold war system no longer represented stability and instead had its own forms of tensions and s posed the question that the USA could no longer uphold its interests by means of accommodation with the USSR. The result was a massive arms programme under Reagan in order to try and undermine the military and social power of the USSR and the Reagan and Thatcher governments acted in an offensive in order to try and undermine the post-war gains of the working class. The period of what was called the post-war settlement was over and the period posed the issue of revolution or counterrevolution. But the working class was ideologically unprepared for this situation and the working class itself was divided by the role of nationalism and concessions made t various sections. The result was a collection of defeats that culminated in the strategic defeat of the Miners strike in 1984-85. In practice workers had shown that they could be militant and act in a collective manner but the working class in general lacked a strategy to overcome the challenge of the offensive of capital and the result was historic defeats.

What this period indicated was that the international class struggle could intensify and so vindicate the approach of Marxism without the prospect of wars as the promoter of revolution. The Transitional Programme was shown to be antiquated at the very moment that the development of the class struggle affirmed the standpoint of Marxism. It had been shown in practice that the capitalist class could not resolve the economic crisis of capitalism without undermining the material interests of the working class. Hence the result would be a militant response of the working class but the mass movement lacked a political interaction with the approach of Marxism in order to promote an effective strategy that would outline the necessity of a revolutionary response to the situation. The working class could only effectively defend its interests by the promotion of the revolutionary transformation of society. However the ruling class maintained an ideological hegemony during this period and the forces of Social Democracy adapted to this situation. This means the influence of Marxism was marginal and trade union politics continued to dominate the mass movement and this meant in practice defensive strategies were still supported in practice and this contributed to the process of defeats. The task of Marxism was to create a strategy that could acquire credibility within the mass movement. What was not understood was that there was something lacking about the transitional programme that meant it could not become the expression of the aspirations of the mass movement. The very tasks of practice meant the development of a new programme in theory.

The demise of Stalinism in the period 1989-91 meant the effective end of the cold war system and its replacement by globalisation. This did not represent just a policy or ideology but was instead the process of the reconstruction of capitalism and the importance of changes since the cold war system. The end of the USSR meant the world economy was no longer divided into two antagonistic camps and instead it was united under the hegemony of the United States. An international capitalist class has not been formed but the national states have been weakened and instead the influence of the various transnational companies and banks has become dominant. In other words despite the continuation of important national differences and tensions the various forces of global capital acknowledge common interests and act together in order to promote the interests of capital against those of labour. For example the governments of France and Germany co-operate in order to promote an austerity plan for the Euro zone. In this context we cannot expect wars to be the promoter of revolutions and instead it is the economic crisis that is the objective bass for the radicalisation of working people and the creation of opposition to capitalism. However we must recognise the marginalisation of Marxism in this situation and develop a strategy that can address this problem and so promote a new process of interaction between the mass movement and Marxism.

THE SITUATION OF CRISIS

Marxist economists have provided many reasons for the development of the crisis. What we can conclude is that the seriousness of this crisis means that the ruling class consider it can only be resolved at the expense of the working class. The political situation is characterised by a public mood of anger about the fact that the burdens of the crisis have to be borne by working people and those that will benefit from the situation are the rich. But the influence of Marxism is marginal and instead within the working class it is trade union politics that is dominant. This means that the strategy that is hegemonic is a defensive one that is based on the policy of negotiation and compromise. Furthermore the mass sentiment is against the austerity measures but people are not sure what they are in favour or as an alternative. This means the anger can be continually neutralised by the ruling class view that there is no alternative to the introduction of austerity measures. In this context Marxists have a crucial strategic and theoretical task which is to argue that the only alternative to a situation of crisis and austerity is the introduction of communism. Any policy of adaptation to capitalism will not be satisfactory and workable and instead what is required is a revolutionary transformation that will result in communism. This means that all emerging mass struggles must be developed in terms of the logic of the future society and the dynamic of their development will be the conscious striving for communism. It is not sufficient to say what we are against and instead we have to outline what we are in favour of as an alternative. The very practical aspects of the situation mean that communism is realistic because it represents an alternative to mass unemployment and poverty and will promote the possibility for humans to shape their own destiny.

However in order to promote the struggle for communism we have to articulate what we mean by communism. The works of Marx and Engels are not adequate in this regard, and the standpoint of Bolshevism is flawed by the acceptance of the role of the party state. Instead we have to utilise many different sources in order to establish a credible conception of what we mean by communism. The point that we will be emphasising is that communism is not a perfect society and so implicitly unobtainable and is instead a society that represents a historical alternative to capitalism and can be created by humans that are attempting to control their own destiny. Hence there is an alternative to the laws of the market and the coercion of the state and this is expressed by people deciding that their subordination to processes that they cannot control is no longer satisfactory. But we must conceive of communism in contemporary terms and not based on the views developed in the past. In this context we must recognise the importance of the ecological situation and this means that communism cannot necessarily be built in accordance with the principles of material abundance and instead has to recognise the continued importance of the scarcity of certain raw materials and goods. Hence we are for a sustainable economy that can still promote the principles of equality and the realisation of need and we are against the promotion of elites that will have privileges within economic activity and the process of distribution. The realisation of this task will be difficult and has never been realised before in history but we are confident that humans are both clever and principled to the extent that they can realise communism.

SECTION TWO – THE UNITY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

Marxism is a doctrine that makes important claims about the relationship in theory and practice. Its most important claim is that the working class is potentially a revolutionary class and this condition will be realised by the overthrow of capitalism and the building of communism. The apparent failure to realise this claim is used to refute Marxism and to claim that it is false. However we can argue that a Marxism that is more modest is better able to uphold a conception of the relationship between theory and practice. We would argue that this more modest Marxism can outline the satisfactory view that history is based on the importance of class struggle. However history does not provide any guarantees as to which class will be successful in this struggle and instead the question as to which class becomes dominant is the result of a complex combination of economic and political factors. The development of the productive forces does not meant that the working class will be ultimately successful in the class struggle and instead the capitalist class can continue to be dominant despite the fact that it is an apparent decaying and conservative class. It is also entirely possible that the apparent political situations for revolutionary transformation have not facilitated the victory of the working class and instead the opportunities for social change have not been taken for a variety of reasons. Indeed we would question the orthodox Marxist view that the working class will be compelled to carry out revolution. This conception denies the importance of freedom of will and the role of voluntary choice in the process of decision making. The working class does not act in accordance with apparent historical and philosophical principles or in accordance with the claims of any doctrine whether it be Marxist or otherwise. Instead the most that can be argued is that the working class is exploited and alienated by the domination of capital-labour relations. The result will be class struggle but the result of class struggle is unknown and uncertain.

Having made these qualifications it was entirely principled and consistent for Marx to develop a strategy for proletarian revolution. The point was that the result of class struggle could plausibly be the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism even if this was not a certainty. Hence it was necessary to develop Marxist parties, strategies and programmes that would advance the prospect of the class struggle acquiring a revolutionary and communist character. Hence the problem was not that Marx conceived of the crucial importance of the class struggle but rather that he considered its outcome in terms of inevitability. In Capital he conceived of the class struggle as the outcome of the process of the negation of the negation and therefore defended philosophical guarantees of the prospects of proletarian success and the inevitability of communism. Hence whilst rejecting Marx’s emphasis on inevitability we would support his understanding of the necessity of strategy in order to promote the prospect of success in the class struggle. This conception of strategy was initially elaborated for the revolutions of 1848. Marx envisaged the prospect of working class leadership in the democratic revolution creating the prospect of future advance towards socialism and communism. However the counterrevolutionary role of the bourgeoisie in this revolution led him to advocate a Red Republic which was a type of proletarian revolution and would merge the tasks of democracy with the end of capitalism. The Paris Commune of 1871 enabled Marx to develop his strategy of proletarian revolution and Engels drew strategic conclusions from the advances of German Social Democracy.

The major lesson made from this historical experience of class struggle was that the mass movement had to consciously acquire the understanding of Marxism if success was to be realised. This was why the role of Marxist parties was important for providing strategic advice and for opposing reformist illusions that the interests of the working class could be realised within capitalism. The Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had a one sided view of the importance of the party in its relation with the mass movement. This led them to disregard the importance of the Soviets created by the working class in the 1905 revolution. However the Bolsheviks in 1917 corrected this mistake. The called for All Power to the Soviets and recognised the potential for world revolution because of the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism that were generated by the imperialist stage of economic development. However the strategic limitation of the Russian Communist Party programme of 1919 was that it conceived the likelihood of revolution in terms of inevitability and this meant that each defeat and setback led to disorientation and demoralisation. The programme also could not explain the periods of stabilisation and the result was the justification of an increasing defensive strategy based on the united front and accommodation to the role of Social Democracy. Ultimately the various defeats of the mid 1920’s led to the justification of the theory of socialism in one country and the perspective of world revolution was reduced to being identical to the defence of the USSR against imperialism. This standpoint was programmatically codified in the 1928 programme of the Communist International.

The onset of the depression of 1929 led to the justification of economic catastrophism and the view that capitalism would automatically collapse, and an important result of this standpoint was the rejection of the importance of the strategy and tactics of proletarian revolution. It was considered sufficient to denounce the role of Social Democracy and to believe that the crisis would bring about rising support for Communism within the working class. However what actually occurred was a complacent attitude towards the prospect of counterrevolution and the denial of the importance of the rise of fascism in Germany. The approach of the Communist International had led to a passive rejection of political struggle against Fascism and the defeat of the working class in Germany. Serious calls for a united front were only made after the success of fascism. The rise of fascism led to serious political disorientation and the Communist International rejected even formal support for the perspective of proletarian revolution. Strategic tasks were reduced to the importance of struggle against fascism and defence of bourgeois democracy and this meant the emerging proletarian revolution in Spain was suppressed by Stalinism in the name of the struggle against Franco. However the conquest of Europe by German Fascism led to the Hitler-Stalin pact and the USSR demoralised the Communist International by becoming the accomplice of the aims of German imperialism. Only the military invasion of the USSR by Germany led to the renewal of the struggle against fascism but the aim of proletarian revolution was still rejected and the Comintern was dissolved in 1943.

The significance of this analysis is to try and show that the role of the Communist International discredited the perspective of world proletarian revolution because of the reduction of political strategy to the requirements of the diplomatic aims of the Soviet bureaucracy. What resulted was historical pessimism about the capacity of the working class to overthrow capitalism. This pessimism was understandable because the Communist International was politically identified with the aspiration for the overthrow of capitalism. The apparent rejection of this aim by the Communist International seemed to end all prospects of world revolution and the result was that the supporters of the USSR began to identify the future of socialism with the actions of the USSR rather than with the apparently discredited role of the international working class. Only the tiny Fourth International and other marginal Marxist groups continued to argue that the problem was with the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism rather than the apparent incapacity of the international working class to overthrow capitalism. In other words Stalinism effectively blamed the working class, via the view that the majority of the working class supported Social Democracy, for the inability to overthrow capitalism in a period of crisis. Stalinism completely lacked a self-critical role that could reflect upon its own relation to the difficulties involved in trying to overcome capitalism and the related lack of progress of world revolution.

In other words the political role of Stalinism was very reactionary. The effect of this role was to estrange the working class from its own capacities and ability to develop an alternative historical future. Stalinism essentially argued that the working class should reject any semblance of independent thought and reasoning and instead accept its leadership unconditionally or regardless of the fact that the actions of the USSR undermined the progress of the world revolution. In other words the ideology of Stalinism called upon the working class to abdicate its sense of independent class interest and instead act as the instrument of the diplomatic requirements of the USSR. The essence of the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism was its dedication to the erosion of any relation of the working class in theory and practice to the class struggle against capitalism. Instead the international proletariat should be the willing instrument of the aims of the Soviet bureaucracy and accept the social condition of a new subordinate class in the countries where the role of the Communist parties had led to the bureaucratic overthrow of capitalism. This meant the working class should become the supporter of the USSR in the Cold war system but it should not try to overcome all power structures in order to realise its own self emancipation. Instead the working class was being forcibly requested to support one oppressive power structure against another.

In this situation where Stalinism was trying to undermine the very sense of class identity within the working class the theoretical role of Trotskyism should have been to reaffirm the historical importance of the working class as a potential agency of social transformation. Instead the various fragments of the Fourth International critically supported the USSR in the cold war and glossed over the antagonistic relationship between the working class and Stalinism in the countries of new class rule. The central aim of Trotskyism was to reaffirm the importance of the Transitional Programme in the post-war period and not to recognise that the very historical importance of the working class was being ideologically and politically undermined by Stalinism. It was also crucial to reject the views of people like Marcuse who argued that the importance of alienation no longer meant the prospect that labour would become discontented with the domination of capital. Hence Trotskyism neglected the role of Marxism as a theory of class struggle and instead became dogmatists that adhered to various theories of economic collapse and supporters of the perspectives of the Transitional Programme and so neglected their major task which was to outline how the working class could transform the situation in the new conditions of the cold war. The most famous theorist of the Fourth International, Ernst Mandel, wrote books about economics but his central concern was to predict the demise of the boom rather than to uphold Marx’s theory of the class struggle. Effectively he did not challenge the Stalinist suppression of the political role of the working class and so did not oppose the view that socialism is the action of an elite rather than the culmination of collective class action.

In a similar manner to the role of the Soviets it was the class action of the working class that undermined this support for the bureaucratic conception of socialism. The revolutionary action of the Hungarian workers in 1956 indicated that the process of self-reform of the Stalinist system was completely inadequate and unprincipled. This action led to the regeneration of a section of Trotskyism and the growth of support for the perspective of political revolution. Isaac Deutscher’s support for self-reform was shown to be an illusion and an opportunist approach when compared to the scope and ambition of the revolutionary struggle of the working class. Furthermore the general strike in France in 1968 refuted the theory about the complacent affluent worker and the collective class reaction to the increasing crisis of capitalism led to the regeneration of Trotskyism and it began to assert its independence from Stalinism. This period was the context for the rebirth of Marxist theory and was a period of the discovery of the Young Marx and the importance of alienation for understanding the working class. The regeneration of the class activity of the working class created the objective conditions for the theoretical construction of a conception of the working class that was different to the standpoint of Stalinism and that of the pessimistic approach of various intellectuals. There was renewed interest in the role of the trade unions and in the study of working class communities. But the strategy of revolution was not developed and instead accommodation to the spontaneous development of the class struggle occurred. The call for general strikes in various struggles was made without consideration of the relationship between Marxism and the mass movement. The apparent inability of Marxism to influence the mass movement in periods of militant struggle was not properly examined. Instead it was assumed that the spontaneous momentum of struggle would promote a revolutionary working class. Hence the role of party became underestimated in the period 1970-79.

The offensive of capital in the 1980’s showed that the newly fashionable conceptions of a militant, collective and even revolutionary working class were very fragile and liable to be undermined by adverse developments. The various defeats of the class struggle because of the limitations of militant trade union politics led to new questioning of the social role of the working class. It was argued that the era of the working class was over and that the new situation indicated the beginning of a politics of new social movements. The working class was considered to be a class that was sectional and defensive and which could no longer represent universal aspirations. Indeed it was argued that the role of the subject of history was over and had been replaced by a fragmented subject that expressed diverse interests. The era of the pressure group had replaced that of class. Trotskyism made little response to this ideological development and instead tried to pretend that nothing had occurred. It called for a renewal of the class struggle without recognising the importance of theoretical work in order to regenerate practice. This meant there was an effective accommodation to a low level of class struggle and acceptance of the peripheral role of Marxism and its apparent irrelevance for the present political situation. The discrepancy between Marxism and the mass movement was reluctantly accepted as an accomplished fact.

However the economic crisis occurred. The various demoralised Marxists began to revive and predict the renewal of the class struggle. But they had conveniently forgotten that the neglected theoretical tasks of the recent period had not been resolved. Questions were still being asked about the social role of the working class and the lack of an interaction between Marxism and the mass movement was an acute problem. Hence the revival of Marxism as an effective political trend would be dependent upon its theoretical capacity to address the historical questions being raised about the class struggle and the role of the working class. This point was shown by the fact that the beginnings of mass struggle were based upon moral protest against the austerity measures and the complete lack of support for the alternative of a class struggle strategy and the aim of communism. The domination of trade union politics also indicated that a defensive approach was hegemonic and that the real alternative of a strategic offensive lacked mass support. In other words it was an urgent practical problem that Marxists address the question of the economic and political importance of the working class and show that working class leadership is crucial if the struggle against austerity measures is to be successful. Instead the euphoria of the emergence of mass struggle has only enhanced the sense of complacency within the organised Marxist movement and created a pretext to neglect the attempt to resolve these outstanding theoretical tasks.

THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE WORKING CLASS

It is argued by many critics that the standpoint of Marxism is based on the understanding that the working class has a revolutionary class character. Hence the fact that proletarian revolution has rarely occurred is considered as refuting the historical perspective of Marxism. However justification of the view that the working class is inherently revolutionary has been elaborated not by Marx but by Luxemburg and Lukacs. Luxemburg utilised the perspective of the mass strike in order to indicate the economic class struggle could become political and a challenge to the existing order, whilst Lukacs utilised philosophical principles in order to argue that the working class could develop revolutionary class consciousness. The alternative approach was provided by Kautsky and Lenin. They argued that the natural development of the class struggle promoted trade union politics and this meant the role of the party was necessary in order to establish the influence of socialist politics from without the class struggle. Both of these approaches were unsatisfactory in relation to understanding the tendencies of the class struggle. On the one hand Luxemburg and Lukacs could not explain long periods of economic and political stability and the fact that the working class tended to support reformist politics and reject the revolutionary approach. They could explain the period of the aftermath of world war one in terms of the exceptional development of revolutionary politics but were unable to explain the typical tendencies and standpoint of mass movements. On the other hand Kautsky and Lenin could not utilise their schema in order to understand the rise of revolutionary politics in the period immediately after world war one. This is why Kautsky rejected the importance of revolution and instead defined the transition to socialism in different and more orderly terms as a process of parliamentary evolution and Lenin adapted a new conception of revolution that was based on All Power to the Soviets and the importance of the mass struggle that challenged the state power of the ruling class. Kautsky became opposed to any inclination of mass movements towards supporting revolutionary actions and Lenin was critical of any accommodation to reformism within the working class.

The failure of the attempt to overthrow capitalism in Europe led the Communist International to adopt the view that the success of proletarian revolution was dependent on the role of the party. This was the re-emergence of the standpoint of Lenin’s ‘What is to be Done’. This approach was presented as the development of Marxism on the role of the relation between the party and class. The problem was that the party became to be conceived as the substitute for the role of the working class. Consequently the Communist International began to justify a conception of party revolution and the perspective of the self emancipation of the working class became reduced to the role of the party. What Marx actually advocated in relation to revolution became obscured and effectively replaced by a different approach that reduced the role of the working class to being the passive support of the role of the party. Ultimately this meant the working class was meant to defend the role of the party when it opposed revolutionary possibilities in the name of the interests of socialism and the USSR. Hence the working class could only reclaim the banner of revolution by rejecting the supremacy of the political role of the party and establishing its political independence and capacity to act in a manner that related class interests to the potential for the social transformation of capitalism. This was the type of revolutionary process that Marx applauded in relation to the formation of the Paris Commune in 1871.

However even if we reject a Stalinist type conception of the relation of party and class the question of how Marx envisaged the historical role of the working class seems to be inconsistent if we consult his writings. Therefore the issue of which approach we support has to be based on textual selection and the process of approval or rejection of the particular standpoint. But before we carry out this task we have to consult historical experience itself in order to arrive at important political conclusions. The social development of capitalism has not led to the generation of numerous instances of proletarian revolutionary possibilities. Instead reformism was been the typical expression of the views of mass movements and even in countries of high levels of militancy like Bolivia the result has not been the success of proletarian revolution. It has not been possible to transform the numerous general strikes into the successful overthrow of capitalism. In historical terms only one genuine proletarian revolution has occurred and that was Russia in 1917. Hence to define countries like Cuba as having a proletarian revolution is based on the misconception of equating the role of a party with the act of working class self- emancipation. Furthermore in the exceptional conditions where revolutionary opportunities have developed the working class has not been able to realise the overthrow of capitalism and instead the situation has stabilised. This indicates that an important role for the party is crucial but that this role should not be at the expense of the creativity and militancy of the working class. The lessons of history do not indicate that the working class cannot act in a revolutionary manner but these instances are not regular and the prospect for the overthrow of capitalism is generally not realised. But the continued problems of capitalism indicate that the prospects for the social transformation of capitalism are not over. The economic crisis indicates the renewed importance of class and the relevance of the social role of the working class. Political leadership by the working class will be crucial if the crisis can be resolved in the interests of the working class and not at its expense.

One of the most influential approaches of Marx concerning the potential for proletarian revolution is the conception that the working class will act in accordance with the development of the productive forces. This economic standpoint is actually based on Marx’s understanding of history and the view that the contradiction between the development of the productive forces and the existing relations of production will result in a process of revolutionary transformation. But the regularity of economic crisis has not resulted in its translation into political process of revolutionary change. Furthermore capitalism has shown to be capable of continual development of the productive forces and so its relations of production have arguably not become a restriction on the prospects of economic development. The onset of globalisation has led to a new period of economic development and it could be argued that if the capitalist class resolve the crisis at the expense of the working class a new period of economic growth will ensue. In other words the requirements of the productive forces do not represent the basis of political transformation and instead capitalism has shown a capacity to continue to develop the productive forces. However we could argue that the inability of capitalism to realise the material needs of the global working class and peasantry is an urgent reason for social transformation. But the fact of this unrealised material need has not resulted in the overthrow of capitalism.

It is also problematic to argue that the working class is compelled by its own revolutionary nature to act to overthrow capitalism. This view that is advocated most consistently by Lukacs is also refuted by historical experience. Social reality does not conform to philosophical principles or dogmatic conceptions of what is considered to be revolutionary. The outcome of events is not pre-determined and we can argue that there is not a teleological end to history that will culminate in either the victory of capitalism or communism. Only the actions of conscious will are able to bring about the success of revolution. In this sense the importance of politics and the role of strategy are crucial. In 1848 Marx outlined a strategy that would promote the development of the revolution and the possibility to overthrow the autocracy. His aim was to obtain working class support for this strategy and the generation of the prospect to advance the prospect of communism by the success of the democratic revolution. The actions of the bourgeoisie undermined the success of his strategy but it was successful in obtaining popular support and it inspired revolutionary actions and represented recognition of the political importance of the role of the working class. Hence the aim of Marxism and Communism was to obtain support for a revolutionary strategy within the mass movement and this strategy would be considered to be credible and principled. Lenin and Gramsci indicated that one of the crucial aims of strategy was to advance the reasons for working class leadership or hegemony in the revolutionary process. In other words the aim of Marxism should not be to impose its directives on the mass movement in an elitist or Blanquist manner but instead obtain popular support for a strategy that the mass movement would modify and improve upon by struggle to achieve these revolutionary objectives.

However the question remains: what would motivate the working class to support a revolutionary strategy? We have argued above that the working class is not acting in accordance with some grand conception of historical development or acting out philosophical principles. Hence it is not inherently revolutionary or a mass expression of historical aims for social improvement. But Marx was able to outline in terms of the most thoughtful and precise analysis that the working class is exploited by capitalism. The capital-labour relation results in the extraction of a surplus value from the working class and this process is the basis for the very dynamism of the economic system, The result of this situation is that class struggle occurs over the allocation of surplus value and the working class resists the attempt to reduce its share to subsistence wages. This situation means that the working class typically struggles to improve rather than overthrow capitalism but in exceptional circumstances the result of this class antagonism is the prospect of revolutionary transformation. Consequently the experience of history indicates that the working class is not generally revolutionary but situations may occur in which it becomes potentially revolutionary. Recent defeats in the class struggle have raised questions about the very class cohesion of the working class and its ability to act in a collective manner. However the importance of class is indicated by the character of the present economic crisis. The ruling class poses the prospects of economic recovery in terms of obtaining acceptance for the intensification of the exploitation of the working class and this shows that the opposition of working people is vital if the austerity measures are to be defeated. This does not mean that a revolutionary response will be automatically generated by the economic situation. It is important to remember that the influence of Marxism is still marginal, and the mass movement does not support a revolutionary strategy. But the intensification of class antagonisms creates the possibility for this development. What is crucial is whether the working class will make the conscious decision to support a Marxist strategy. The ability to answer this question cannot be pre-determined and instead all that we can assume is that the class struggle is important because of the antagonistic character of the social relations of capitalism. It will be the role of politics that will influence whether the crisis can be resolved in a communist and revolutionary manner.

It has been argued that the importance of ideology undermines the prospect of the development of the class struggle even in situations of acute economic and political crisis. We can certainly agree that ideology is an important factor that is able to influence the outcome of the class struggle to the advantage of the ruling class in many situations. But this possibility does not mean that ideology is able to perpetually misrepresent the situation to the continued advantage of the ruling class. In this context we would argue that Marxism is itself an ideology that is able to oppose the ideology of the ruling class and to provide a historical alternative that can promote struggle against the capitalist system. Hence the problem has often been that the proponents of Marxism have become opportunist and so generated ideological confusion within the working class. This happened in 1914 when German Social Democracy opted to support the imperialist war and so disorient its supporters and therefore undermine opposition to the military conflict. The actions of Stalinism have had a similar effect. In typical conditions the ruling class is able to obtain popular support for the view that the parliamentary system is in the national interest and that trade union militancy is against the stability of society. This is why trade union action is often unpopular and led to the isolation of important struggles such as the miner’s strike of 1984-85. The situation in the 1980’s was ideologically dominated by a type of right-wing populism, as described by Stuart Hall, and therefore the offensive of capital in period of economic crisis and mass unemployment was credible because of the ideological hegemony of the ruling class. But it has to be remembered that the ability to provide various concessions to sections of the working class such as the sale of council houses and shares in privatised industries was the material basis for support of the ideology of the ruling class. These types of concessions are not possible in a situation of chronic national debt and the inability to stimulate growth.

In other words generalised anger about the austerity measures is widespread because of the perception that the burdens are to be felt most by the poorest sections of society. In this context the utilisation of strike action by the trade unions has become popular and the various direct actions by protest groups have achieved public support. However ruling class ideology has not been challenged to the extent that the system has not been questioned and instead the vague policy standpoint of the emerging mass struggle is for the withdrawal of the austerity measures rather than the conscious striving to realise an alternative. People know what they are against and do not articulate what they are for. This situation indicates that the system is still considered to be a natural given even if people are disgusted by the actions of bankers and governments. The replacement of the Socialist party in Spain with a Conservative government committed to seriously tackling the debt is also an indication of the ideological confusion because people are effectively voting for the situation to become worse rather than better. Hence the limitations of the Parliamentary system is an indication that the resulting election of parties ruthlessly committed to implementing austerity measures is an indication that working people need to develop alternative popular organs of opposition. This means the creation of organisations that can effectively challenge the ideological hegemony of the ruling class and provide policies that represent a genuine historical alternative. The fact that this situation is not yet occurring throughout Europe is an indication that the ideology of the ruling class has been undermined but not yet rejected. Mass anger is not yet sufficient in order to bring about an ideological transformation of the present situation. The ruling class still has ideological hegemony and if this situation is to be changed what is required is the development of the process of interaction between Marxism and the mass movement. Only in this context will the mass anger become consciously transformed into the striving for an historical alternative. But there is an additional complication, some of the forces claiming to be Marxist are accommodating to the mass movement by rejecting revolutionary strategic objectives and therefore implicitly suggesting that trade union politics is sufficient. This limited approach is undermining the prospect of ideological transformation and instead accommodating to the illusions that answers to the austerity measures can be located within capitalism. The prospect of ideological transformation of the mass movement is dependent on the emergence of a principled Marxism that can oppose illusions with strategic clarity and so articulate powerful reasons for the communist alternative to capitalism.

The above is meant to indicate that it would be a complacent illusion to suggest the crisis will somehow advance the prospect of communism because of the imperatives of historical development or the reassertion of the revolutionary role of the working class. Prospects for success do not depend upon the formulations of Marxist theory and instead are connected to the balance of class forces which is intricately related to the level of class consciousness and ideological conditions. In turn these criteria are related to the ability of Marxism to provide a credible strategy and principled objectives. The failure of Marxism in this regard will undermine the prospect of success of the mass struggle. In this context the situation is favourable to the resurgence of Marxism as an important explanation of the crisis and the expression of an alternative to the austerity measures. But the rise of Marxism may still be undermined by the problem of its present weakness and the fact that the present generation have little idea what Marxism represents and they have only a vague idea of what is meant by socialism. To the older generation socialism is still defined as a failed cause and is not considered as a valid alternative to capitalism. Consequently the ruling class has an ideological domination because of the past problems with trying to realise socialism and the adverse effects of the falsification of Marxism by Stalinism and Social Democracy. Hence the emerging mass struggle is presently politically based on the standpoint of moral protest and suspicion about the revolutionary transformation of society. This means the world view of capitalism is not challenged even if aspects of capitalism are subject to criticism and scrutiny. Marxism is also considered sceptically because of its support for revolution and an alternative type of society. The result is that trade union politics is ideologically hegemonic within the emerging mass movement. Hence the politics of reformism is once again fashionable and the call to modify and regulate capitalism is not subject to derision.

The result of this situation is that the working class has made a comeback in political terms but the influence of Marxism is at an all time low. Consequently the crucial question is to what extent will the working class make political progress without the strategic role of Marxism? The prospects seem to suggest the possibility of an important historical defeat but it would be pessimistic and dogmatic to argue that this will be the inherent outcome of the domination of trade union politics. This is because the very demands of the struggle may indicate the importance of the role of Marxism, and it could become influential if Marxism is able to be equal to the challenges of the situation. Marxism can become relevant to the extent that it is able to challenge the political and ideological domination of trade union politics. This process represents the perpetual struggle between reformism and revolution. The weakness of contemporary reformism is the fact that the ruling class is not able to grant concessions because of the seriousness of the economic crisis, and the problems for the revolutionary approach is that it is marginalised and considered to be unrealistic. The logic of events will facilitate the increased influence of reformism or the revolutionary standpoint. Reformism has the advantage that it is the natural outcome of the class struggle and the very victories of the working class tend to increase the credibility of reformism. But the prospect of the present victory of reformism is limited because the ruling class is aware that their capacity to introduce austerity measures requires the undermining of the strength of the working class. The ruling class will be satisfied with nothing less than the defeat of the working class. In this context the credibility of trade union politics is being put to the test in a very serious manner. Trade union leaders are realising that the ruling class is not interested in serious negotiations and instead wants complete capitulation on issues like pension reform. The result is that the trade union leadership has no other option than to engage in serious strike action including the possibility of general strike type action. This type of action has already occurred in Greece and is possible elsewhere. The result has been increased credibility of Marxism and questions being raised about the cautious leadership offered by the trade union bureaucrats. Hence the rank and file will not be satisfied will one day type actions and are likely to demand increasingly ambitious action. An effective Marxism could massively increase its influence in this dynamic situation.

However the prospects for Marxism are presently limited because of the failure to provide a credible strategy. Demagogic calls for a general strike are a poor substitute for the lack of strategic imagination. Marxism is unable to advocate anything that would promote the transformation of mass anger and a public mood against austerity measures into a conscious striving for communism. This is because the various forces of Marxism are reluctant to raise the call for a different type of society. Instead they tend to be content with the sense that militancy will resolve the problems of the economic situation. Hence Marxists do not recognise that the aim of communism is no longer popular and that it requires a special effort in order to articulate why communism is the only alternative to the introduction of the austerity measures. The failure to raise the call for communism is the major reason that trade union politics are presently not being contested. What is ideologically hegemonic is the view that the caring society can be realised within capitalism and that the role of the public sector can become the dominant logic of the capitalist system. This is an illusion because it is the very role of the public sector that is a luxury in the situation of acute economic crisis and it will be reduced in accordance with the imperatives of capital accumulation. The only way that the public sector can be defended is by transformation to communism and the overcoming of the domination of capital. But Marxists are reluctant to make this argument because they may seem to be dogmatic and instead they prefer to outline ‘realistic’ programmes of action based on what seems to be obtainable within capitalism. However these types of minimum programmes are what are unrealistic. Furthermore if it comes to a choice between the minimum programme offered by the trade union leaders or Marxism the mass movement will choose the policies of the former because of the greater influence and importance of the trade unions. Marxism will marginalise itself by advocating a minimum programme that seems to be less credible than the alternative offered by the trade union bureaucracy. But if Marxism boldly and audaciously advocates communism it is possible that the test of events will vindicate this standpoint and indicate that serious social improvement cannot be realised under capitalism. Only with this principled approach can Marxism make progress and interact with the mass movement.

However it is important to comprehend that even with the most intransigent approach there are no guarantees of success and the victory of communism. It is entirely possible that the scale of the challenges will be too great and the fragility and flaws of humanity will ensure that defeat occurs. It is important to recognise that the very progress of humanity has been accompanied by tremendous catastrophe and tragedy. But if defeat does occur Marxism will have to reorient itself to the next period of class struggle and offer a new strategy for the realisation of communism. This was the approach of Marx in 1850 after the defeat of the European revolution of 1848. He argued that it was necessary to prepare for a new period of revolution and that the development of capitalism would advance the prospects for communism. If defeat is to occur in the present period this would not end the spectre of communism. This spectre will continue to haunt capitalism as long as capitalism exists because communism is the only social alternative to the domination of capitalist relations of production.

THE STRATEGY OF THE COMMUNIST ALTERNATIVE TO THE PRESENT ECONOMIC CRISIS

The role of Marxists is to suggest to all the participants in the mass struggles against the austerity measures that the ultimate goal is the realisation of communism. Advocating this perspective is likely to result in scepticism and even hostility and so the tendency will be for Marxists to dilute this historical aim until it becomes palatable to the mass movement. The result of this dilution will probably be the promotion of the conception of a fairer society and the modification of capitalism by means of ethical regulation. In other words the process of dilution will be the generation of a minimum programme and the apparently maximum aim of communism will seem to be distant and unobtainable. This is an unprincipled position that is based on compromise and political retreat. It will mean that the Marxists will have nothing to suggest to the mass movement that is distinctive and important. Instead the Marxists will drift in relation to the changing moods of the mass movement and will be unable to provide strategic coherence about how progress can be made in the mass struggle. Ultimately Marxism will seem to be irrelevant and become absorbed into the mass movement in a manner that results in the denial of its political independence and the negation of its capacity to intervene in a distinctive manner. This will mean a failure to oppose the illusions of the mass movement and therefore setbacks will not enable Marxism to provide an alternative and instead Marxism will flounder alongside the mass organisations of the working class.

Consequently the crucial question is how can Marxism advocate the communist alternative in a manner that can acquire popularity and support? The point to make is that communism is not just a particular type of society it is also an expression of the character of political organisation and the representation of opposition to capitalism. Every time people organise to oppose capitalism aspects of what constitute communism are articulated. If this situation was not possible communism would be merely an aspect of imagination that was impractical in reality. This means the aspect of solidarity and cooperation that is required to conduct a struggle is an expression of communism and so undermines the continued domination of capitalist relations of production. Consequently what is required is that the principles of solidarity and organisation become generalised to the extent that they result in the development of an alternative to the logic of capitalism and provide an impulse to transition to a different type of society.

In this context strikes represent the development of solidarity and strike committees could be considered to be an expression of communism within capitalism but the problem is that strikes are often for limited objectives and primarily have the aim to bring about negotiations with the employers. The historic one day public sector strike of November 30th 2011 is a generalised attempt to get the government to negotiate seriously about pensions and it does not have the aim of ending the austerity measures. The trade union leaders lack a serious strategy of opposition to the austerity measures and instead it is a popular misconception that the aim of the one day strike is to criticise the cuts. In other words the type of strikes envisaged by the trade union leaders are defensive, sectional and for limited objectives that do not amount to the development of an opposition to the aims of the government. Hence if we are to create the political conditions that promote real opposition to the austerity measures we have to overcome the limitations of the role of the trade union leadership and instead generate forms of struggle that can effectively reject the aims of the government. In this context we have to unite the role of the trade unions with community groups around aims that effectively challenge the supposed right of the government to govern and which poses the necessity of the historical alternative of communism. The tactic that represents this aim is that of occupation. Any community centre subject to cuts, or library and sports centre should be occupied. The role of the trade unions should be to support this development and to provide the solidarity to enable the particular community to not only function but to also express the potential for a new society. This means the very capacity of the community group to function is because it represented the principle of solidarity and cooperation rather than profit making and competition and so expresses the potential for an alternative society. If this situation becomes generalised the widespread organisation of the process of occupation of both community organisations will generate the impulse to occupy workplaces. The development of mass struggle will provide the political basis to undermine the objections of the trade union leaders concerning militant action and if they continue to act in a conservative manner the conditions will have been created to transform the Unions and create a new and effectively revolutionary leadership.

It could be argued that this action programme is unrealistic or even that it neglects the leading role of the working class. However we would suggest that popular support for occupations is already present but that it has not been advocated in a vehement manner because people still have illusions that local authorities and the government can be persuaded to change course about closures of facilities as a result of mass pressure. But this limited approach is not successful and so the only options are acceptance of the closure of facilities or the alternative of occupation. Furthermore the reason that the role of the trade unions is not given more prominence is because of the problem created by the trade union leaders. They are restricting the trade unions to a defensive role and trying to avoid political controversy. Only the political transformation of the Unions will generate the conditions for them to have a more active role in the mass struggle against the austerity measures. However it is important to recognise that the role of the Unions is crucial because they represent the most active expression of the logic of solidarity within capitalism and so are the primary basis of communism within capitalism. When the Unions join the struggle the prospect of victory becomes likely. But it is necessary to inaugurate a militant struggle that will encourage the Unions to overcome their present defensive logic. In the past Union struggles have been isolated because of the hostility of public opinion but now that public anger is in favour of mass action this can be translated into support for occupations and the development of an alternative power centre that challenges the logic of capitalist relations of production. This situation will promote the prospect of Union support. Consequently the unity of the community groups and the Unions will then provide a sense of what an alternative society could be like and therefore generate within capitalism the principles and organisation of communism.

In this context the perspective of an indefinite general strike to bring about the formation of a workers government would become a realistic perspective. The aim of the strike would no longer be defensive and about putting pressure on the government to engage in more serious negotiations. Instead the fact that the working class in both the community and the Unions has been able to organise in practice the functioning of a different society will indicate that the policy of concessions is no longer sufficient. Instead the process of occupations of community facilities and workplaces will indicate that a new type of democracy and authority is possible and so encourage the mass movement to strive for political power. The general strike will no longer be conceived as being the most extreme form of a negotiating posture and instead is understood to be an instrument of insurrection and the most important tactic to bring about a new type of political power. The aim of the workers government that is realised by the success of the general strike will be to ensure the democratic organisation of society so that communism can be a practical and realisable aim.

It could be argued that this strategy is rigid and dogmatic and underestimates the importance of the trade unions. In relation to the latter point the importance of the trade unions is recognised but so is the problem of the opportunism of the various trade union leaderships. This means the trade union bureaucracy is reluctant to develop a strategy of opposition to the austerity measures and the result is that the trade unions are not presently at the forefront of struggle against the public expenditure cuts. It is important to acknowledge that the action of November 30th 2011 is against pension reform and tries to avoid developing defiance and mass action concerning the austerity measures. In other countries the Unions have played a more active role because of the militancy of the rank and file as in Greece but this is not the present situation in the UK. Instead the unorganised community groups are in the vanguard of the struggle and we should not try to deny this situation in terms of supporting a rigid strategy and instead try to develop mass struggle accordingly and to therefore unite the role of the community groups with the Unions. Is occupation an inflexible tactic? If the call for occupation is completely futile we would have to call for the development of a different approach. However we are not yet at this point. Instead the very process of the ruthless implementation of public expenditure cuts and the decrease in community facilities indicates the possibility of occupation as a necessary response. The mass anger about austerity measures can be translated into the development of occupations and the formation of a type of dual power within society. However if this demand proves to be unpopular it will be necessary to consider the application of different types of tactics but the aim of developing communism within capitalism would still be an urgent principle to be realised in the course of mass struggle.

The point is that the tactics we try to apply can be flexible but our strategic aims are inflexible. In this context the apparent lack of success in the application of the tactic of occupation will result in it being revised and altered. But the aim of this tactic revision will not be to reject the importance of our strategic objective and instead the intention will be to develop more effective tactics that can enhance the prospect to realise the strategy. It would be unprincipled to consider the failure of a given tactic as reason to revise our strategy because the aim of communism is the only alternative to the approach of austerity measures. Furthermore regardless of the failures of given tactics the process of the progress of communism within capitalism is an indication that communism is not impractical and so the very task of tactical revision will be to create better tactics that are more able to articulate the connection between mass struggles and the goal of communism. It is also possible that the mass struggle itself will create new an unexpected forms of struggle that have not been anticipated and so the role of theory will be to connect these new types of mass organisation to the aim of communism. In this manner the Bolsheviks supported All Power to the Soviets as the popular basis of the revolutionary transformation of society.

In this flexible manner we are also prepared to acknowledge that the tactics advocated by rival organisations are superior in relation to the prospects of the advance of the struggle. For example the ‘World to Win’ organisation calls for the formation of Peoples Assemblies in order to advance the prospects of the mass struggle. They argue that these organisations will promote the role of mass democracy and express the principles of a future society. The DSA does not presently advocate Peoples Assemblies because they seem to be an artificial imposition onto the mass struggle rather than being the natural outcome of the actions of mass movements. Instead it would seem that occupations generated by the various struggles would generate the development of forms of popular democracy and discussion about how to make political progress and concerning the type of society that is wanted in order to replace capitalism. However the DSA could be wrong. It is entirely possible that the development of popular mass action would result in the formation of Peoples Assemblies. In this context the DSA would be happy to be wrong and would re-orient its policies in order to accommodate the importance of Peoples Assemblies. Indeed we would try to theoretically develop our understanding of the situation in order to indicate the relation of these Assemblies to the struggle for Communism. The same point could be said about any other tactics of the various Marxist groups. However the type of tactical revision we would not contemplate is that which is based on the rejection of the strategic aim of communism. We would insist that despite the increasing popularity of a given tactic that communism is still the strategic aim that is the historical alternative to the implementation of the austerity measures.

WHAT IS COMMUNISM?

It has been argued by various critics that communism is not realisable and that it is a utopian society of the imagination that does not correspond to human nature and the activity of human beings. However we would argue that communism would be inconceivable if it was not already emerging within capitalism and has become the dominant principle of many types of human activity. This is because the central aspect of communism would be cooperation and the development of economic activity under capitalist relations of production is based on cooperation. The aim of capital accumulation may be profit but the possibilities to develop profit are based on the social role of a cooperative workforce. The division of labour is also organised in terms of the cooperative relation between different productive tasks and the imposition of supervision and hierarchy is often perceived as artificial and unnecessary in relation to the effective realisation of economic tasks. Hence it could be argued that capitalism is the distortion of the process of the realisation of communism that is the actual central aspect of the development of capitalist relations of production. Capitalism could not exist without the dynamic role of cooperative labour. If communism is already emerging within capitalism why is it so difficult to realise communism as a dominant mode of production? The first answer to this question is political and ideological. Many people are not convinced of the superiority of communism. They consider that it is more undemocratic and elitist than capitalism. The historical experience of the Soviet Union only convinces people that their distrust is confirmed. Secondly, the various theoretical elaborations of the conception of communism do not seem to be able to argue convincingly for the superiority of communism and instead indicate outstanding problems such as the feasibility of a society based on the domination of the plan rather than the market.

However the major problem is that people do not consider their own activity is an expression of what would be meant by communism. This is because they are alienated from their own activity as a result of the domination of the capital-labour relation. Capitalism is accepted as a natural given and communism seems to be something that is merely the standpoint of Marxism rather than the expression of the actual dynamism of social and economic activity. This is why people do not recognise the contradiction represented by the introduction of the austerity measures as the antagonism between the interests of capital and the prospects for communism. The servants of capital are trying to undermine the aspects of communism within society by the introduction of the austerity measures. Hence the opposition to the austerity measures is spontaneous support for the aspects of communism within capitalist society. This situation provides the major argument for the possibility of the success of communism and why it could replace capitalism because what is proposed by Marxism is not the imposition of some artificial construct onto society but instead the emancipation of what is restricted and repressed within capitalism. But the importance of alienation means that people have a false image of social activity and so are estranged from the very aspects that promote the liberation of society. For example work is considered as oppressive and boring rather than the potential for human emancipation and alienation generates the mood that we cannot consciously improve our social situation. Hence an important role of Marxism is to advocate a strategy that can overcome the influence of alienation and so generate the view that humans are able to control their own destiny. In other words capitalism creates countertendencies that promotes scepticism about the possibilities for communism and therefore glosses over the fact that capitalism is itself the greatest promoter of the prospects for communism.

But capitalism also develops an ideology that upholds the view that it is the most democratic form of society. It is argued that only liberal democracy upholds political pluralism and the rivalry between parties and that the alternative of Soviet democracy was a failure and led to one party rule. Marxism has historically failed to provide an alternative to this criticism and it has not been able to argue convincingly that the development of participatory democracy as the alternative to representative democracy would not ultimately justify one party rule. The alternative view that communism would mean the end of the role of politics has also led to the criticism that this approach justifies authoritarian rule. Marxism could answer this criticism if it elaborated the argument that the commitment to universal suffrage is compatible with communism and a pluralist political system is possible. Historically it has not theoretically developed in relation to this issue because it has argued that people would not vote for the reintroduction of capitalism. What has not been recognised is that the apparent inability to vote for capitalism would be perceived as political repression and possibly result in mass discontent. This problem could be resolved if the right to vote for capitalism was combined with the advances of communism. In this context it would be irrational to vote for capitalism instead of supporting the progress made under communism. Consequently the crucial question is to develop a social system that people consider they are valuable participants and able to make a meaningful contribution to its development. The historical experience of the USSR has shown that economic problems and especially the issue of scarcity have led to the formation of an economic elite that has undermined the prospects of political democracy. Therefore resolving economic problems would seem to be crucial to the issue of generating genuine political democracy. This means the crucial question becomes is communism a viable economic project? The apparent economic limitations of communism would seem to be the major objective basis undermining the realisation of genuine popular democracy. In the USSR the working class was soon in opposition to the system because of its inability to met material needs. In this situation the functioning of Soviet democracy became impossible and instead power was exercise the party elite within the state apparatus.

The 1919 Programme of the Russian Communist Party committed it to the development of a democratic economy based on the organisation of a plan developed by the role of experts and the trade unions. But this aim was never realised because of the economic problems caused by the civil war and the tendencies towards the creation of a command economy as a result of war communism. This meant the implementation of the plan was based on the supervision of select experts and the working class was effectively excluded from having an important role and instead was expected to merely affirm the targets of the plan. Increasingly the conception of socialism was based on the development of nationalisation under the strict control of the state and the issue of workers democracy and the role of the trade unions was considered to be an expression of the illusions of the past. This meant a democratic plan was impossible and planning became secondary to the aim of modernisation of the economy. The result was a low wage economy based on the production of goods that lacked quality but could be mass produced. It was possible to generate an economy that was capable of producing basic means of production and yet was unable to realise the needs of consumption in an adequate manner. Furthermore the economic limitations meant that the needs of the population were met by a process of private trade and production that was illegal and yet tolerated by the state. However the limitations of the economy meant that the claims about the building of socialism were considered to be propaganda and the claims about the prospects of communism were considered to be empty boasts. The ideological legacy of the failures of Stalinism was that the conception of a democratic plan based on the development of the productive forces was discredited and instead capitalism as s superior economic system seems to have been vindicated.

It could be argued that the beginning of the problems of the Soviet economy was caused by unfavourable material conditions and isolation. The lack of world revolution meant the Soviet regime could not cooperate with more advanced economies in the international division of labour. But the conception of the economy was always based on the importance of the experts and the emphasis on the role of the trade unions was formal in practice. Hence the trade unions were meant to implement the advice of the experts. In other words the Bolsheviks had no adequate understanding of how socialist relations of production could be created. On the one hand they rejected workers control of production as impractical and unrealistic but on the other hand they could not envisage any alternative to the primary role of specialists and experts. Consequently they conceived of the development of production in technocratic and elitist terms and recognition of the importance of the trade unions was not meant to undermine the role of hierarchy. The economic rights of the working class were uncertain in this situation and the prospect of strikes to improve the conditions of the workers was disproved by the state and would result in official sanction. This meant even under the regime of Lenin the role of the state was economically dynamic and rested on the significance of the experts, or one man management, and the working class was subordinate within the relations of production. The official reasoning of this situation was the necessity of economic reconstruction and the overcoming of the decline of production and the working class was not considered to be culturally mature to have an active role in this process of economic renewal.

The ideological legacy of this development was that the conception of economic democracy under socialism was considered problematical and in practice the state dictated economic objectives and how they should be realised. In theory Soviet textbooks argued that plans were implemented with popular support but everyone knew that this was an expression of propaganda and that in reality working people obeyed the imperatives of the state. In this context it seemed that market economies were more democratic because of the influence of consumer sovereignty and the toleration of the role of independent trade unions. Under the actions of the market and limited state intervention in the economy working people seemed to have greater material affluence and public welfare. Hence the conception of democratic socialism that was more effective than capitalism became conceived in the reformist terms of the role of a mixed economy and total state ownership of the means of production was distrusted. In this unfavourable ideological situation how could the conception of democratic socialism and communism based on the economic decision making of the producers and consumers acquire renewed appeal? The renewal of communism has been based on the historical fact that the elitist economy of Stalinism developed an acute crisis and the various advocates of the system admitted that it was inferior to capitalism. Ultimately this situation led to the demise o Stalinism because of popular upheaval but this development was to the benefit of capitalism because nobody could envisage the prospect of the realisation of a different type of socialism. However the limitations of the process of the restoration of capitalism and the development of economic crisis have led to the renewed interest in alternatives to capitalism. However these will only be credible if it can be shown that producers are capable of organising the economy.

In other words it is possible to develop a plan of production based on the role of computers and technological development. Many companies organise their production within capitalism in accordance with plans but there is no semblance of democracy in this process. It is also possible to envisage the role of democracy within an economy in theoretical terms. However the objection to socialism and communism is that people will still prefer to realise their needs based on the role of the market because of its capacity to act in accordance with the imperatives of supply and demand. Hence it is argued that a plan can never become as flexible as the role of the market and the very act of trying to develop a democratic plan that satisfied everyone would make the plan even more inflexible. In theory there are no reasonable objections to these arguments and it is not possible to show how the socialist and communist economy would be superior in practice to capitalism. This means that the major argument for the advantages of socialism and communism are provided by the limitations of capitalism. The continuation of capitalism means mass unemployment and the generation of poverty. Furthermore the end of a situation of easy credit because of the banking crisis means that access to consumer goods is being made more difficult and the result is that the operation of the market has become an inefficient means of obtaining consumer goods. The increasing inability of capitalism to meet material needs, and its failure to tackle the ecological crisis, is an indication that people have to ideologically reject their passive acceptance of the superiority of the market and try to consciously develop an alternative. Historical experience has not shown success in the attempt to construct a democratic socialist economy but this failure should not lead to reluctance about the prospects of supporting the development of socialism because of the increased problems with capitalism. The point is that if people continue to be reluctant to tackle the economic situation radically because of the apparent past failures of socialism the present situation will get worse because of the tendency of capitalism to enter into deeper crisis. It is the historical limitations of contemporary capitalism that indicate the reason for introducing socialism and communism is more urgent than ever. However failure will occur if we do not adequately learn the most important lessons of the past.

It is an empirical fact that the period of the most prolonged prosperity of the Soviet Union was that of the New Economic Policy of 1923-29. This was because the operation of the market was tolerated under the conditions of the primary role of the state and the objective of developing a planned economy. The freedom to trade created an incentive for the peasants to support socialism and the result was that the various diverse strata of the working population could unite around the realisation of material incentives because of the success of increasing production and trade. However the experience of Yugoslavia has also shown that if the market becomes more important than the plan the result is the generation of unemployment and the development of a situation in which some areas are more prosperous than others. Hence the crucial lesson of these diverse experiences is to develop a relationship between the market and the plan that can avoid the creation of in-balances and unevenness. This means that the market must be subordinated to the plan but the market must have influence on the plan in order to stimulate the production of goods that people want and to ensure the importance of the consumer sector of the economy. The only manner in which the correct proportions of the market and plan can be developed is by the role of economic democracy. This means both the producers and consumers must be the social force that ensures the creation of a situation in which they are not estranged from the development of the plan and the operation of the market. Hence the aims and objectives of the plan and the role of the market is in accordance with the aspirations of the producers and consumers and therefore these aspects do not exert an independent and external force that represents the power of a strong state and the process of alienation in both production and consumption.

It has been argued that the plan cannot work unless it is the expression of an elite and undemocratic state and the role of the market is only possible when it is not subject to the conscious intervention of the consumers. Hence a plan is only compatible with the command economy and the market can only function on the basis of capitalist relations of production. But the point is that the plan did not function adequately in a command economy because the goods produced were of low quality and there was enormous waste, and the consumer items were often not wanted. Crucially the people were alienated from the objectives of the plan because they were not in control of its development and operation. Hence the plan seemed to represent an external and dominating force and so defiance of the aims of the plan was widespread and the legitimacy of the plan was denied because of its very undemocratic character. Formally it seemed that growth was possible under this type of plan but the reality was that only certain sections of the economy were efficient like the arms sector because of the necessity of high quality resulting from the cold war. In relation to the market it is subordinated to what will be profitable in the capitalist system and so the important aspect of production is the generation of exchange value rather than use value. This means that needs are generally only adequately realised in periods of boom and the role of the market does not efficiently met needs in periods of slump and crisis. Consequently the plan could be more effective if it was democratically organised and the market could met the aspirations of consumer demand if it was not limited by the imperatives of capital accumulation.

The very process of relating the plan and market would require democratic consultation and participation in the development of these aspects of the economy. Without democracy the plan would be the expression of the aims of an elite state and the producers would be expected to implement the instructions of the plan rather than being the creators of the process of the formation of economic aims via planning. In contrast without democracy the market would impose itself in an independent manner on the producers and consumers and the result would be the development of tendencies that generated capitalist relations of production and the capital-labour relation. Only the role of democracy can ensure that state ownership of the means of production does not generate the domination of a new economic elite and that the influence of the market does not result in capitalist restoration. The point that is vital to make is that without democracy the attempt to develop a socialist society based on the collective ownership of the majority of the means of production will be a new failure and therefore we have a practical imperative to develop in theory convincing explanations of how this democracy can work in practice. This means that any attempt to justify socialism as being a period based on the importance of the state and lacking democracy must be rejected because it is unworkable in both theory and practice. The fact that a democratic socialist economy has never been developed in theory and practice should not be an excuse to deny its possibility. Instead we should consider that it is a priority to elaborate what we mean by a democratic socialist economy. This theoretical advance would then increase the confidence of working people to strive for an alternative to capitalism.

Why do we still agree with Marx that communism is not instantly possible after the realisation of a process of change? Those that argue communism is the immediate prospect after revolutionary change ignore the fact that the immediate period after a process of change will still have aspects of the past such as the role of money, wages and the importance of the market. Hence the process of transition to communism is a period in which these aspects of the past can be replaced by new and superior forms of economic organisation and mediation of needs. Indeed it can even be a period in which the issue of what should be new or retained from the past is discussed in a non-dogmatic manner. The realisation of communism would be a society in which the economic processes of the new have become dominant and society is able to met needs without any aspect of compulsion. Conscious organisation of production and distribution should have replaced any reliance on economic processes that are independent of the importance of conscious control. However it is important to recognise that one important aspect of external influence on the realisation of communism and this will be the ecological situation. In this context the capacity to met needs in terms of abundance will be modified by the prospect that important raw materials will be in short supply. This means that scarcity will still be possible in a communist society. Potentially this could create a serious situation in that the condition of scarcity in the past has justified the domination of the economy by elites. But we can be confident that if the stage of socialism has been successfully realised by the development of a democratic economy then the economic and political conditions will have been generated to resolve this problem of scarcity in a manner that does not result in the re-emergence of elites. The important point to make is that the prospect of the successful realisation of socialism is what will make communism possible and viable.

It is necessary to also study two important questions. Firstly, issues about democracy. It has been argued that socialism and democracy are not compatible. However Marx based his arguments for an alternative to capitalism on the view that a new type of society would represent a higher and more superior form of democracy. His view was that socialism would represent a participatory democracy and would represent the realisation of the highest form of universal suffrage. This was the central lesson he made from the experience of the Paris Commune. Lenin and the Bolsheviks interpreted t Marx’s views to mean that the bourgeoisie should be denied political rights during the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This view appeared to be confirmed by the civil war but the actual rejection of the rights of the bourgeoisie became justification of the reduction of the rights of everyone except the dominant party. The point was that the Bolsheviks diluted and revised Marx’s conception of the importance of democracy within socialism. Hence historical experience has shown that the principle of universal suffrage and the freedom of political parties is vital if democracy is to develop in political terms under socialism. The point is that if the people are prepared to vote for capitalism in a situation of developing socialism then something must have happened that would have undermined the success of socialism. It is surely irrational to think that people in a dynamic socialist society would vote to reintroduce capitalism? The alternative of banning capitalist parties in order to ensure that capitalism cannot be recreated is problematic because it establishes a precedent to ban working class parties also. The result is the formation of one party rule and the erosion of a society based on the principle of democracy. What results is the formation of the rule of an elite party and the prospects of Stalinism being repeated. The only alternative to this situation is a multi-party democracy.

However it is possible to argue that the above situation could be influenced by the prospects of civil war and the tempo of development of world revolution. It was the situation of civil war that led to the one party state in Russia and the pressures of external capitalism led to the formation of a strong sate and the importance of the standing army. The 1919 Russian Communist Party Programme is explicit that the state could not wither away as long as the Soviet regime was still isolated and the threat of external and internal counterrevolution persisted. Could this process be repeated in a new revolutionary situation? It is to be hoped that any revolution that develops in Europe or elsewhere would not be isolated and instead would be part of a generalised process of international class struggle. For example the acute economic crisis is an indication that the economic and political conditions are maturing for intentional revolution and the crisis in the Euro Zone area is an indication that generalised social upheaval could occur and is starting to occur. Hence it is to be hoped that the situation is not similar to that which faced the Soviet regime in 1919. Furthermore the people of Europe are not likely to support violent counterrevolution and are more likely to try and resolve the political situation in a peaceful manner. This is why it could be argued the conditions are favourable for a peaceful process of social transformation. The recent period has resulted in impressive demonstrations against war and for peace and the historical experience o state violence has led to a yearning for peace. However it is necessary to relate this striving for peace to support for equality and justice or the perspective of revolution. Objectively the situation is maturing for the prospect of revolutionary change in terms of the maturing of the contradictions of capitalism but at the subjective level there is still little support for revolution. Indeed the development of the Arab Spring may have led to the formation of the popular view that revolution is only appropriate in countries that lack democracy. Revolution should not occur in countries with an advanced democracy. However mass anger at the austerity measures is still present and has resulted in mass demonstrations and protests. But the present striving is for the ethical regulation of capitalism rather than revolution. This means that one of the tasks of Marxism is to argue that only a process of revolution is required if the situation is to be resolved in favour of the interests of working people. But what is a revolution in modern times?

THE IMPORTANCE OF REVOLUTION

Many people do not support revolution because of its apparent associations with violence and terror. They do not agree with the Marxist definition of revolution which is that it represents the transformation of the power of classes within society. This means that the major aim of the Marxist conception of revolution is to replace the political power of the capitalist class with the power of the working class. The role of strategy should be related to this task. It has been argued that revolution has become antiquated because of the importance of the role of democracy and outmoded by the increasing affluence of society. Furthermore it is suggested that the result of the revolution is the imposition of a regime that is more elitist and repressive than the system it has succeeded. In relation to answering these objections to the revolutionary perspective it is necessary to define what is meant by revolution. Support for the process of revolution is not meant as a justification for violence and terror. In the past revolutions have had these connotations because of the fact they often resulted in civil war or were the result of civil war. But the Marxist conception of proletarian revolution is concerned with the process of social transformation and the realisation of communism. In this context revolution is the act that generates the prospect of communism and the significance of the Paris Commune was that it represented a mass struggle that created the realisation of a higher form of democracy that would promote the possibility of communism. The realisation of Soviet power in Russia had the same historical significance. In contrast the revolutionary violence of the civil war in China and Cuba did not represent a proletarian revolutionary process because the result was the formation of a new type of class rule that was opposed to the development of socialism and communism. This society did not have the development of organs of mass revolutionary democracy and instead the army became the basis of the state and this state was unaccountable to working people.

Consequently in the 20th century there has only been one genuine proletarian revolution because only the revolution in Russia created the organs of a popular democracy that could have promoted the prospect of communism. This prospect was not realised because of unfavourable material conditions and the formation of a party state that rejected the importance of popular democracy. The increasing importance of repression and terror was because the regime increasing represented a type of repressive elitist domination. It was the rejection of revolutionary objectives and principles that led to the domination of state repression, whilst the realisation of a revolutionary approach would have required the development of democracy, pluralism and orderly economic development. The forced collectivisation was the expression of the creation of a new class based on an economic surplus rather than the development of socialism via the process of the modernisation of society. Modernisation created a ruling class that dominated civil society through its control of the state and the result was political atomisation and the ideological redefinition of socialism to mean state nationalisation and a plan controlled by the bureaucracy. However the identification of the USSR with socialism meant that the very conception of revolution and socialism became obscured and ultimately the very conception of world revolution was considered in terms of Soviet military expansion. It has been necessary to try and re-discover what is meant by proletarian revolution and to challenge the Soviet mystification of this process. In this context it has been necessary to establish that the act of proletarian revolution is an act of a class in struggle and not the elite act of a party claiming to represent the class. The role of a party can promote revolution but a genuine proletarian revolution will be the conscious action of a class that creates organs of popular democracy in order to assist the process of social transformation. The class content of a genuine revolution will be the creation of a higher form of democracy that is able to both establish popular legitimacy and forms of economic democracy that undermine the domination of capital-labour relations. If the result is a situation in which the importance of the role of capital continues in new forms then the revolution will not have succeeded and the result will be the creation of new forms of exploitation. The Soviet regime failed because it led to this new type of class rule rather than advance towards the realisation of socialism and communism.

It is important to accept that a genuine proletarian revolution may not automatically succeed in its objectives. The task of creating functioning organs of popular democracy and developing a different logic within economic activity may be too difficult and the result could be regression and the formation of new class rule. It is a complacent judgement to merely blame Stalinism for the failure to develop socialism. The experience of Leninism indicates the tremendous difficulties in trying to build a democratic and popular type of socialism and it is entirely possible that even in a developed capitalist country the process of transition to communism will also be complex and difficult. The result could be failure. However we do not justify the perspective of proletarian revolution in terms of the claim of automatic success. Instead we argue that the limitations of capitalism will be expressed in terms of the development of the class struggle and that this process of intensification may – we repeat, may and not will – create the conditions for social revolution. If this revolution is successful and democratic the prospects for communism may be favourable but success is not inevitable. Instead the revolutionary regime will have to be self-critical of all its actions and ensure the highest level of democratic action and effectiveness in tackling the problem of the legacy of capital-labour relations. Only success in these difficult tasks will ensure that the process of revolution is making progress and advancing towards the construction of a communist society. It is important to also acknowledge that the threat of counterrevolution and nuclear war could undermine the process of the construction of communism. The advance towards communism is still dependent upon progress in the world revolution and it would be a tremendous advance if the very act of revolution was international and simultaneous. This prospect is made possible by the very increasing interdependent character of capitalism and the weakening of the power of the nation state.

It has been argued by critics of Marxism that revolution is a 19th century perspective and has been undermined by the very social and political progress that has occurred within capitalism. Hence the argument is that the affluent people of modern capitalism are unlikely to contemplate revolution and instead revolution has become an act of people in countries with generalised poverty. This situation has indeed been the experience of the 20th century, but it is important to recognise that these revolutions were not proletarian and instead advanced forms of capitalism and the struggle against imperialism. It is also necessary to accept that the working class of the developed capitalist countries has made advances in terms of the role of reforms and it would seem that revolution has become antiquated and an expression of the class struggle at a lower level of development. Furthermore revolution may have been considered to be a valid strategy as a response to the threat of fascism but this threat has receded and instead liberal democracy has become stable. Hence the aim should be to utilise the institutions of liberal democracy if the interests of working people are to be advanced in contemporary society. This argument had validity until the 1980’s but the increasing crisis of capitalism has meant the representatives of capital have increasingly resorted to extra-Parliamentary methods in order to uphold the interests of capital and undermine the interests of labour. The important defeats of the trade unions and the increasing rightward shift of Social Democracy indicates that only the most militant victories in the class struggle can begin to overcome the situation in which the balance of class forces is in favour of capital and against labour. In other words it is the very process of the intensification of the class struggle because of the protracted crisis of capitalism that is creating the possible political conditions for the development of a revolutionary process. The very logic of the class struggle indicates that the existing defensive strategies of the trade unions are no longer sufficient in order to uphold the interests of the working class and instead only an offensive strategy aimed at revolutionary transformation will be sufficient to overcome the offensive of capital against labour.

However we have to recognise the difference between the intensification of the class struggle and revolution. It is entirely possible that the class struggle will continue to develop and yet working people will not become conscious supporters of revolution. Hence the only people advocating revolution will be a few isolated and discredited Marxists. The possible result of this situation will be important defeats in the class struggle and working people will still refuse to make the conclusion that revolution is required because it seems to represent a leap into an unknown and uncertain future. This is the ultimate argument against revolution which is that however insecure the situation becomes under capitalism it could still be worse after a revolution which results in instability and the dislocation of production. Theoretically this prospect was acknowledged by Bukharin with his conception of the costs of revolution, which acknowledged that the result of the revolution would be the regression of the productive forces and the creation of adverse material conditions. Consequently in order to address fears about the effects of revolution, Marxists have to develop a conception of the possibility of the smooth transition to a new social system and the prospect of the rapid creation of a harmonious society. The work of Kautsky will be important in this regard. However Marxists have to admit that the perspective of revolution has come to be considered alarming because of the overall stability of modern capitalist society. This is why the only people who advocate revolution are Marxists and it would seem that revolution represents a myth of Marxism and therefore irrelevant to the problems of contemporary capitalism. Consequently it will require protracted ideological struggle before the majority of working people accept the necessity of revolution. People can accept the importance of class struggle because it is an increasing aspect of their reality and represents the alternative to the offensive of capital against labour. But these same people cannot accept the prospect of revolution because it represents an apparent political rupture that can only result in tragic consequences. Hence even the most militant adherents of the class struggle tend to still support reforms rather than revolution.

Consequently Marxists have to challenge the popular version of revolution and show that it is not primarily about violence and disorder and instead it represents a transformation of social power. The process of proletarian revolution represents the democratic organisation of society in favour of working people and the related overcoming of the domination of capital. Progress does not require terror and the role of state domination and instead it is about working people making their own history and creating secure material prosperity. This development requires tranquillity and stability and not tensions and disharmony. Primarily the revolutionary process will be advanced if it is peaceful and this prospect will be promoted if the class struggle is brought to a successful conclusion by the working class seizure of political power. This act will not be undemocratic because no-one has voted for the austerity measures that the ruling class are determined to implement. Instead the act of revolution in the conditions of austerity can be popular and democratic and represent the only policy that corresponds to the interests of working people. Only the success of revolution will enable the development of a situation in which the issues of the economic crisis can be dealt with in a fair manner and ensure that burdens are not placed on the poor. Hence revolution could be the logical outcome of the economic crisis, the fact that revolution is still unpopular is because of the legacy of past historical experience and the relative economic success of contemporary capitalism. However, the present situation has led to the intensification of the class struggle, and so the ultimate strategic conclusion is that revolution is required if the class struggle of labour against capital is to be successful.

MARXISM AND REALITY

It has been argued that Marxism is a doctrine that is unsuitable for the modern world and is unable to explain the complexity and diversity of the present. This criticism has validity if Marxism fails to be creative and capable of explaining what is new and changing about the world. Marxism had to develop and explain the development of imperialism in the early 20th century and why imperialism led to wars and the intensification of the class struggle. Hence Marxism is not a rigid doctrine based upon immutable truths and is instead a standpoint that must be constantly revised if the latest changes within the social world are to be understood. This is why Marxism has to comprehend the development of capitalism as globalisation and explain that the tendency for inter-imperialist conflict has become a secondary aspect of social reality. However Marxism is primarily a theory of the class struggle and therefore it has to explain why it is important and how it has changed over the recent period. Marxism has been subject to the challenge that the class struggle has been replaced by the importance of New Social Movements and the conception of a unified and universal subject of change has been replaced by a fragmented collection of particular subjects. It would be dogmatic for Marxism to deny the importance of the struggle of women, gays and lesbians and oppressed racial groups. The crucial question created by this controversy is whether the struggles of the New Social Movements have somehow replaced the importance of class and the class struggle? In answering this question we would not to deny the fact that struggles based around the issue of oppression has become a dynamic aspect of discontent within modern capitalism. But these struggles do not occur within new social relations that replace the previous importance of class. Instead they have become an expression of the development of struggle against the limitations of the domination of capital in the contemporary period. This means that the New Social Movements have contributed new meaning to the character of the universal subject rather than representing the creation of new subjects of transformation.

Consequently the task of Marxism is not to dogmatically reject the importance of the New Social Movements as a denial of the importance of class, but rather to indicate the strategic importance of the oppressed for the class struggle. If Marxism was unwilling and unable to carry out this task it would indicate that it was stuck in the past, but the point is that the New Social Movements were actually important in the past only they were not recognised. Thus the conception of the subject is made more concrete and practical by the establishment of its relation to the New Social Movements and their discontents are not easily resolved within capitalism. Hence the sense of what we mean by the revolutionary subject can be enhanced and elaborated if the relation of the various particulars to the universal of class is established. In this context we need to articulate how this relation is important for the struggle against the austerity measures and how the transformation of this relation into an effective political alliance will only increase the significance of the social forces aligned against the austerity measures. The result will be strategic refinement of the process of opposition to the domination of capital, and so this theoretical refinement cannot be to the detriment of the standpoint of classical Marxism. But it is important to also understand that any attempt to downgrade the importance of class in terms of emphasising the role of the New Social Movements should be opposed because this standpoint is based on the reduction of reality to an abstraction that is unreal. This is because it is not possible to understand reality without recognising the importance of the capital-labour relation.

It has also been argued by Hardt and Negri that the conception of the proletariat as the expression of the revolutionary subject should be replaced by the importance of the multitude. This would be an acknowledgement that the past significance of the factory working class has been replaced by that of immaterial labour, which represents labour that has a tendency to go beyond the imperatives of capital. The multitude is a socially inclusive conception that would include all those that are for popular democracy and are discontented by the limitations of capitalism. Hence Marxism was always undermined by its emphasis on the factory working class and the inability to develop a strategy of transformation based on this approach. In replay it could be argued that this is a caricature of the approach of classical Marxism. Marxism has never historically rejected the importance of alliances and so has not defined the importance of class in exclusive terms. For example it has conceived of the importance of the worker-peasant alliance as crucial for the demise of feudalism and making progress towards socialism. However emphasis on the centrality of the working class was based on its social role within capital-labour relations and was not because of dogmatic and doctrinal considerations. Furthermore the continued importance of the capital-labour relation indicates that alienated labour has sociological significance and is relevant when developing a strategy for social transformation. It is true that it would be wrong to fetishise the role of factory workers and that factory work is no longer the monolithic form of production and accumulation within modern capitalism. The increasing importance of immaterial labour is a new aspect of globalised capitalism. But it would be premature to argue that immaterial labour is becoming the dominant type of work. Instead it would be precise to define both factory work and immaterial labour as types of labour that are exploited under capitalist relations of production. This means the crucial task is to unite these types of labour in struggle against capitalism.

In other words the term labour is what explains the character of exploited work within capitalism, and it is discontented labour that can become oppositional and revolutionary. Consequently theoretical progress would not be made by replacing the importance of labour with that of the multitude. This is a more diverse definition that effectively reduces the forces of social transformation to the role of the people. The result is a populist dilution of the importance of social class. The political implications of this terminological change could be to justify a modern form of reformism and the rejection of revolution as the expression of an outmoded Marxism. This point has been affirmed by the reduction of a programme of change to the attempt to realise a decent income for all. The relation of this change to the transformation of social relations is obscured and reduced in importance. However despite these limitations Hardt and Negri have outlined the importance of the changing forms of work and how they enhance the prospect of communism. The conception of immaterial work can improve the Marxist understanding of the development of communism within capitalism and how the very development of Empire represents victory in the class struggle and means that capital is increasingly parasitic and can be overcome.

Another attempt to revise Marxism has been that of John Holloway. He argues that Marxism has been distracted by the struggle for political power and maintains that the struggles of the oppressed and exploited have not been about power. What is necessary to realise is the condition of anti-power. Holloway can only make his approach seem credible by distorting the history of Marxism. He considers that the regression of Stalinism was an outcome of the positivist emphasis of Marxism of Engels and the Second International. The reality was that Kautsky the major theoretician of the Second International was the major critic of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet regime. The philosophical sympathy for positivism of Kautsky did not express an apology for the role of Stalinism. Instead the philosophical basis of Stalinism was a crude vulgarisation of dialectical and historical materialism. Lenin had originally demarcated his version of Marxism from the evolutionary approach of the Second International and it was unfavourable conditions and not particular theoretical version of Marxism that led to the domination of Stalinism. Furthermore the Russian revolution was an expression of the unity of party and class rather than the imposition of the party elite model. Hence it would be a myth to argue that working people are striving for anti-power and Marxist parties are based on power. It was instead the Stalinist distortion that led to the formation of parties that had elite objectives and aims. Consequently it is possible to differentiate the history of Marxism from that of Stalinism. Marxism is about the promotion of the self-emancipation of the working class whilst Stalinism aspires to realise a new class type of rule as the alternative to capitalism.

In other words the history of Marxism is not divided into a philosophical approach of negativity and the rejection of the imperatives of power and the various forms of political Marxism that are based on the striving for power. Instead it can be argued that Marxism is primarily the attempt to advance social emancipation and communism and the aim of power is secondary to these aims. The importance of power is a means to an end and the role of the means should not undermine the attainment of the end. This is why Stalinism is anti-Marxism because it effectively rejects the end of communism in order to uphold a regime of terror and total power in the present. Consequently principled Marxism is opposed to Stalinism and considers that power is always subordinated to the end and rejects any justification of power at the expense of the end. This means that the so-called socialism of Stalinism was not socialism because it could not represent progress towards communism and instead was a system that was based on repression of the working class.

In other words to the principled Marxist power was a secondary aspect of revolution. What was important was the revolutionary transformation of capitalism and power was the successful culmination of the revolutionary process. It was recognised that power could corrupt the revolutionary regime and that was why the role of the state should wither away in the transition to communism because the state was the major manifestation of political power, and the society should be democratic in order to undermine the formation of a distinct state based on the tendency towards unlimited power. However the inability of the Soviets to function effectively did result in the tendency towards absolute power of the political elite, but this regressive process was a rejection of the original aims of the revolution.

What is the political role of anti-power in the present? It is understandable that people are suspicious of the role of power because of the historical experience of Stalinism. But it is important to remember that capitalism is a system of power and it is difficult to undermine this system without establishing an alternative form of power. The logic of anti-power is to establish a rival power that co-exists alongside capitalism and which will ultimately be undermined and overthrown unless it realises a revolution that ends the power of capitalism. Furthermore it is questionable to assert that the people are spontaneously for anti-power and only parties are for power. It could be argued that the various struggles often lack clear strategic objectives, but they can only succeed if the end result is the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a new power. This view is not a dogmatic assertion of Marxism but is instead a conclusion made from the fact that the intensification of class struggle can only result in victory for working people if it culminates in the formation of a new power. The task will be to ensure that this new power does not degenerate and become corrupt. This task could be difficult because the creation of a type of authority has the potential to become an expression of the development of an external force that exercises power over people. Hence the type of authority that is established after a revolution has to be accountable and popular and involve the majority of the people in the process of government and administration. The result will be that power is voluntary and involve a minimum of coercion. However it will not be possible to abolish power because this will mean that the role of authority will be undermined and so it will be difficult to make the necessary decisions about economic tasks and the role of politics. The lack of authority will result in chaos and instability and people will yearn for order in terms of supporting the restoration of capitalism which was based on the rule of law and the regulation of society.

This is why the anarchist view that society can be created without the role of authority and the state is impossible. All types of societies have to take decisions and have rules and regulations. The lack of rules would mean that society would be based on the survival of the fittest and the result would be the justification of egotistical behaviour and the re-emergence of the role of competition and the market. Instead socialism should be based on the importance of laws and the importance of authority in order to create and implement laws. This situation should not be coercive if the process of lawmaking is made by popular participation and enforced in a democratic manner. The lack of credible authority based on the enforcement of laws has led to the justification of arbitrary regimes that have utilised repression in order to enforce their domination. The alternative of anarchism that has supported the view that society can establish instant communism based on the demise of the state, authority and the role of law suggests a conception of human nature that is perfect and without flaws. The anarchist view implies that humans can regulate themselves by voluntary agreement and so the role of authority becomes superfluous. However this type of society would quickly become fragmented and rival centres of power would emerge. The result will be several forms of regulation and the tendency to generate private production because of the lack of popular and democratic authority. The anarchist dislike of politics does not mean that politics would not quickly surface in order to resolve disputes and provide a basis of agreement within society. However this would not be communist politics and instead it would be the politics of capitalism that would once again become credible because it could justify traditional forms of law, order and authority.

Socialism and communism can only be credible if it establishes its own forms of stability, tradition and authority. Only then will the prospect of the withering away of the state become realistic and replaced by authority that is not coercive. The state is defined primarily by its coercive character and so the decline of the state is essentially about the demise of an external force that enforces its will by compulsion and coercion. But the rule making aspect of the state will be continued in terms of the importance of forms of authority and the process of lawmaking. If this aspect of the state was to also wither away the result would be instability and the creation of political tensions and the prospect of counterrevolution. Any society based on arbitrary decision making is inherently instable and will generate popular discontent. This is because despotism will replace popular democracy and the emergence of a new type of state that is coercive. In this context the view of the 1919 Russian Communist Party programme was untenable when it argued that the rule of law should be replaced by the role of popular tribunals. The result was the discrediting of the law and the promotion of tendencies that justified despotism and arbitrary rule in accordance with the decrees of the party elite via their control of the Soviets. What should have been the alternative was the creation of a credible system of law that was based on the establishment of a new independent judiciary. This situation could have provided the popular legitimacy for the law making process and led to the development of the Soviet system on the basis of respect for the law.

It has been argued by the philosopher Zizek that the process of revolution is one of excess and terror. These aspects have been part of previous revolutions because of the political limitations of bourgeois revolutions and the development of civil war after the success of the proletarian revolution in Russia. But we would not consider that excess and terror should be an integral part of a revolutionary process. This is because the result would be the generation of a tendency towards despotic rule and the decline of the role of popular and democratic decision making processes. The Russian revolution led to the development of state repression because of the fact that excess became part of the functioning of the regime and led to a situation in which the requirements of what was considered to be exceptional dictated the process of process of decision making. This meant that the dynamism of excess resulted in the formation of a party state that ruled in a despotic manner. Ultimately what occurred was the regime of terror and purges. It was a myth to believe that terror was some type of response to the pressure of the masses and an instrument for undermining the social power of the bureaucracy. The actual factor leading to terror was Stalin’s aspiration to continually create a loyal bureaucracy and to ensure the submissiveness of the population. Therefore terror and excess was not an expression of how a revolutionary regime should function and instead they were features of the decline of the revolution and the replacement of democratic popular power by a state despotism. Terror and excess represented the domination of unlimited power and the revolutionary regime would have actually functioned in terms of the enhancement of popular legitimacy and consent. Instead terror and excess meant the justification of unlimited coercion and the creation of a strong state that dictated its power to civil society. The principled success of the revolution would have meant civil society being able to curb the external power of the state and introducing the importance of voluntary decision making. The approach of Zizek can only be a justification of Stalinism and not support for a genuine revolutionary process.

This discussion of the role of power in the process of transition to socialism and communism enables us to answer the point made by Holloway that our aim should be the formation of anti-power. The conception of anti-power is refuted not only by the fact that it is not possible and instead can only be subordinated to the imperatives of capital. It is also possible to argue that the problem of the excessive utilisation of power can be overcome in the revolutionary process. The more genuine and democratic is the revolution the more able it is to establish popular forms of legitimacy and a credible law making system. A democratic revolutionary regime would be able to create laws that had popular support and people would be willing to enforce these laws. The result would be the establishment of judicial restraint on the role of the state and the tendency for the promotion of the unlimited external power of the state would be undermined. Furthermore the importance of the principle and functioning of democracy would enhance the political power of civil society in relation to the role of the state. This would mean the conditions would be created for the withering away of the state and for the flourishing of the voluntary character of society. The prospects for the creation of an unlimited state power would be overcome because the state has no reason to become despotic power.

However it has been argued that revolution will result in the development of civil war and this will create the tendencies for the formation of a strong state with the tendencies to become a despotic power. It is interesting that the 1919 Russian Communist Party programme argues that the civil war meant the conception of the formation of a popular militia had to be replaced by the construction of a standing army. The development of this type of army could only facilitate the development of a strong state and undermine the progress of popular democratic tendencies. This situation was certainly a feature of the Russian revolution. But it has to be understood that the development of civil war was encouraged by the intervention of the various imperialist powers and the sense that the regime was fragile and based on the minority support of the working class. The social structure of Russia encouraged civil war because the peasants were considered to be potentially counterrevolutionary. Only the reactionary programme of the forces of counterrevolution undermined their prospects of success because they failed to support land reform and so the peasants tended to side with the Red Army. In other words the complex political situation was the result of a low level of development of the productive forces and the fragile character of the proletarian revolution.

It is to be hoped that the situation will be drastically different in the aftermath of revolution in the contemporary world. The social importance of the working class will be greater, countries are more urban and the prospect is that revolutions will have more popular legitimacy than the Russian revolution. In this context the prospects for civil war are less and most societies will be accustomed to resolve political differences in a peaceful manner. This does not mean that civil war can be ruled out because the traditional ruling class will oppose the transformation of economic and political power. The point is that civil war can be avoided because contemporary revolution can only be successful because it has been the act of the immense majority on behalf of the immense majority. It is the fact that society is more proletarian than Russia that provides the most important reason why the revolution can be peaceful and violence and civil war avoided. Furthermore it is important to acknowledge that the issue of resistance to the austerity measures is very popular and generates mass anger and the prospect of mass struggles. The fact that capitalism can only resolve the economic crisis at the expense of the working class means that an issue has been created that has revolutionary significance and can result in the mobilisation of working people to overthrow capitalism. This process has already started in Greece with constant mass demonstrations and limited general strikes. Hence the issue for the people of Greece is: what is the next step to advance the struggle against the austerity measures? The fact that all the established politicians in Greece are in favour of austerity measures generates supports for the extra-Parliamentary struggle and promotes the prospect of militant mass struggles becoming revolutionary. Traditional establishment politicians are no longer legitimate because of the fact they support austerity measures and instead the supporters of radical change have found an issue that makes revolution credible and possible. The supporters of the old ruling class would not dare to utilise violence to oppose revolution in the situation in which the issue of that of resisting the austerity measures.

However, an important objection to revolution is that it an act of opposition to the role of liberal democracy. Revolution is defined as being essentially anti-democratic and against the principle of political pluralism. It is argued that the supporters of opposition to the austerity measures should wait for the next election in order to vote for people that support their viewpoint. Furthermore it is maintained that only acceptance of the democratic Parliamentary process can ensure that change will be peaceful and only this type of change can bring about progress. These arguments may have been valid in the past when reforms were possible and some parties were committed to supporting changes in economic and political terms. But in this present period of economic crisis there is no party that supports effective opposition to austerity measures. The Labour Party under the leadership of Ed Miliband has articulated its opposition to strikes and made it clear that it supports public expenditure cuts. In this context the role of political leadership is with the trade unions but they presently oppose militant action that goes beyond the objectives of negotiation, compromise and defensive gestures like the recent November 30th 2011 strike. This has meant that the only organisations that effectively articulate the anger of the public with the austerity measures are the various Marxists groups. They can elaborate analysis indicating the austerity measures are an expression of the economic crisis and the alternative is the struggle to overthrow capitalism and establish communism. The point to be made is that the Marxist viewpoint will remain irrelevant unless it becomes the conscious standpoint of millions of people. Hence the struggle for revolution will only become successful if it becomes the standpoint of a majority of the people and therefore the act of revolution is truly democratic and popular. If the perspective of revolution remains that of a minority, however conscious, it cannot succeed. Instead the process of revolution will establish mass organs of struggle that rival the power of the bourgeois Parliament and represent the democratic legitimacy of this social transformation. The validity of the revolution is not only that it establishes what it is opposed to in a powerful manner but that it also represents what is possible. The mass organs of struggle will express opposition to the austerity measures and say what they are in favour of, which is communism.

Hence the democratic and popular character of the revolutionary process should minimise the possibilities of violence. Instead most people will support the act of revolution because the bourgeois politicians have historically failed to resolve the economic crisis in an effective and fair manner. But in order for revolution to occur the influence of Marxism has to become greater. If Marxism remains marginal then both revolution and progress will not occur. Instead defeats in the class struggle will result in the resolving of the crisis at the expense of working people. The point being made is not that Marxist leadership of the revolution is essential but rather that the strategic views of Marxism should become influential and inspire the development of the mass struggle. What is crucial is that an interaction between Marxism and the mass movement is developed. The forms of this interaction may be varied and cannot necessarily be anticipated in advance. It will also be necessary to revise strategy if the struggle develops in unexpected terms and what is crucial is to remember that tactics are always secondary to the realisation of the strategic aims of revolution and communism. Prospects of success are not inevitable and even the development of class struggle is not favourable if the trade union leaders retain ideological hegemony. It is crucial that Marxists recognise their own importance if the struggle is to develop and become more ambitious and militant. This means Marxism should not be passive and instead be prepared to raise audacious demands for the generation of the advance of the struggle.

THE FUTURE OF MARXISM

At present the forces of Marxism are fragmented into many tiny groups, and this situation is complicated by the fact that Marxism represents both principled and unprincipled politics. The unprincipled groups support uncritically the trade union leaders whilst the principled forces represent independent politics. This situation of fragmentation means that Marxism is ineffective and has a tendency to act in an opportunist manner in order to try and overcome its weakness. These problems are intensified by the fact that the younger generation does not know what Marxism is and the politics of the young are motivated by ethical protest and mistrust of all forms of power. Revolution is associated by many people with violence and is considered an extreme action that occurs in countries that lack democracy. The conception of communism is unknown and all alternatives to capitalism are considered in a sceptical manner. Hence many people criticise capitalism whilst not supporting any historical alternative. Anarchism has been reduced to a method of protest and its ideas are only vaguely understood. In this unfavourable political climate the tendency is for Marxism to adapt to larger forces especially the trade unions, and so Marxism is diluted into being a form of trade union politics. Several attempts to create a larger Marxist party have failed in the recent past but the point is that the situation was never more favourable to the creation of a principled Marxist party. The aspects it could be created around are: firstly, opposition to the austerity measures, secondly, for revolutionary change and the development of mass organs of struggle, thirdly for communism and international revolution.

In other words, the prospect of unity is created by the importance of the present issues of the class struggle, but in the past these issues have not been present and instead the prospect of unity has been promoted around the moral ideal of unity or the view that the working class should have political representation. The problem is that these ideals or principles did not promote a sense of urgency and instead the call for the formation of a party seemed to be the aspiration of a particular group. What resulted was failure. However the present situation is different. The present call for party unity has a concrete character and represents a relation to a very important issue in the class struggle that generates the prospects of common action. Instead of recognising the favourable situation to call for a party many groups are neglecting this opportunity because of past failures. They are allowing the past to influence the present. What we should do is forget the problems of the past and instead recognise that the urgency of the tasks created by the class struggle is creating new conditions that favour the formation of a Marxist party. It is possible that a programme of action for the struggle against the austerity measures could promote the required level of unity for the successful formation of a Marxist party.

The creation of a Marxist party is the preference of the DSA. However if all attempts to form this type of party fail then the DSA would critically support the formation of a worker’s party based on the role of the trade unions. We recognise that this party is not likely to support a revolutionary programme, and so we would agitate for the right to promote a revolutionary programme within this new party. In the present political conditions we believe that the prospects of obtaining support for a revolutionary programme are favourable and that the reformist character of this party may be brief. We would call on all Marxist organisations to join this workers party and to strive together in order to promote a revolutionary programme.

The present situation is that of the continued disunity of Marxism. This is based on the legacy of the past and disputes within the Fourth International and the acrimony created by the disintegration of the Socialist Alliance. It is time to overcome the problems of the past and to unite around common action concerning the urgent tasks of the class struggle. The DSA puts forward this programme as our contribution towards overcoming the present tensions and in the spirit of the promotion of unity. We also believe that this programme tries to answer the many objections people have about the revolutionary standpoint of Marxism, and we suggest that revolution and communism are the only credible answer to the problems of the present.