REPLY TO MIKE MACNAIR – DEFENCE OF SOCIALISM FROM BELOW BY PHIL SHARPE

Mike Macnair has outlined his criticisms of the strategy of socialism from below in his article: “Socialism from below: a delusion”(1) He argues that the defence of the standpoint of socialism from below is associated with Anarchists like Bakunin and represents a contradictory approach that can reconcile spontaneity of mass struggle with the role of elite leadership. In contrast, ‘socialism from above’ is expressed by utopian socialists who uphold the development of a society run by an enlightened elite, which influences the policies of Stalinism. Macnair’s argument is that Marxism is opposed to both extremes and is characterised instead by the following perspective: “Hence the working class learning to self-manage in building its own class movement, specifically including cooperatives, etc, and learning to lead society through working class political action, was the initial key to the process through which the working class could first take power, and then lead society altogether beyond the existence of classes and expert elites of any sort.”(2) In comparison to this strategic approach socialism from below is unable to promote the ability of decision making except in terms of the role of conspiracy and the effective acceptance of the activity of an elite that dictates the character of the actions of the masses in struggle. This means the dynamic role of the masses in struggle is a fiction because what is instead justified is the subordination of spontaneity to the prestige of charismatic leaders like Bakunin. The alternative of socialism from above is equally flawed because it is based on an elite being able to impose its ideological influence on the population in order to obtain popular support for its actions. This development has resulted in Stalinism which has proved to be untenable as the basis to promote socialism, and so the result has been demoralisation and the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

Macnair is justifying an inherent connection between socialism from above and socialism from below. However we can have either an unprincipled socialism from below, such as Anarchism, which ultimately results in a flawed and problematical socialism from above; or alternatively we can have a repressive socialism from above like Stalinism, which is upheld by the ideological illusions of the popular masses. In this latter instance so-called socialism from above is sustained by the delusions of socialism from below. The result of historical experience is not to defend socialism from above, which represents the illusions of utopian socialism about the rule of an enlightened elite, and nor is it to defend socialism from below that is not sustainable because it actually promotes the development of socialism from above. Instead we should uphold a principled conception of the relationship of socialism from above with socialism from below that is able to realise rather than repress the role of democracy and popular participation: “‘Socialism from above’ depends on support from ‘below’. But it is equally true that ‘socialism from below’ inherently involves leadership and coordination ‘from above’.”(3)

The obvious flaw and problem with this standpoint is that there is an implicit assumption that there is a vanguard with the gift of developing the superior ideas that generate the advance of society: “The individual or individuals who have the idea first lead; or, if you will, they are the vanguard, the first to reach a certain point, or the advanced part.”(4) The alternative to this type of leadership is to justify a society based on people who act as conductors without the necessary role of an orchestra, or society is reduced to the chaos of a jazz jam session. Macnair is making the point that socialism will still involve people who make the decisions and people who implement them. However, what is crucial is that this process will be democratic: “The case of having ideas first…..what is required is merely recognition that neither creativity, nor getting things right, is a permanent attribute of any individual, and therefore institutional choices which facilitate as far as possible the open exchange and discussion of rival ideas before any particular idea is carried into action.”(5) What he ignores is that this process, however democratic, will create its own tensions and contradictions because we have a hierarchy between those that exercise power in terms of the decision makers and those that are expected to carry out the decisions. The understanding that ideas can come from those that are not considered the creators of decisions is rejected by the assumption of a hierarchy in terms of the process of the formation of ideas and the connected procedures of carrying them out. Macnair assumes a sense of superiority contrasted to inferiority in relation to the generation of ideas, and this is not disguised by his recognition of the importance of democracy concerning the practical realisation of ideas. In other words he rejects the promotion of a type of democracy that would mean all of the people have equal access to the prospect of making decisions in terms of the genuine character of popular participation. This would not mean that the importance of leadership and the carrying out of functions is denied, but rather the consolidation of an elite is opposed in terms of the rejection of the formation of a vanguard elite that has a monopoly over the development of ideas and upholds a situation of unequal power in relation to access to resources.

Macnair would argue that this standpoint is unreal because it attempts to deny the importance of individual and minority initiative and instead upholds an impractical form of popular participation and related conception of direct democracy. This objection can be rejected in terms of the fact that the institutional procedures of a society that is aiming to be socialist should be as democratic as possible. Hence the very character of the state should be accountable to the influence of the people via the role of the multi-party system located in the popular political institutions. These parties should be amenable to the possibility for ideas from below to be promoted that can influence the development of the system. In other words the inherent aspect of socialism from above in terms of the role of the state, and political parties, should be genuinely accountable to the influence of the working people, or socialism from below. The aspect of socialism from above should be modified and influenced in principled terms by the importance of the popular participation of the forces of socialism from below. If any aspect of this relationship becomes ossified, bureaucratised, or passive, the possibility of a genuinely democratic type of socialism being constructed becomes compromised. This was the situation in the Russia revolution when the vanguard of the party became the active expression of the political process and the working class became subordinated and alienated.(6) Lenin and the Bolsheviks started to defend the conception of socialism from above in terms of the equation of the conception of the dictatorship of the party with the dictatorship of the proletariat. They glossed over the facts that the Soviets had become an instrument of the party and the workers had become a passive instrument of the dictates of the Bolsheviks. This situation was made possible by the undermining of multi-party democracy and the development of the monopoly of power of the Bolsheviks. The only principled alternative to this situation would have been to maintain the vitality of the Soviets and the related ability of the working class to retain accountability over the Bolsheviks. In this manner the only principled form of socialism is expressed by the ability of the forces of socialism from below to control the necessary aspects of socialism from above.

In other words the principled and democratic character of socialism from below is the essential basis to supervise and influence the necessary aspects of socialism from above. We may accept that it is necessary to have the role of leadership and parties that are able to articulate and represent the agency of class. But unless this development is based on accountable terms, such as the role of Soviets that can establish popular control over the role of the revolutionary leadership, the result will be that the aspect of socialism from above becomes the basis of party dictatorship or an undemocratic form of political domination. This is what happened in the civil war because of the necessity to defeat the forces of reaction. One commentator argues that the unfavourable situation in October 1917, of developing famine, the prospect of civil war and the catastrophic economic situation, meant that these adverse circumstances generated the creation of party dictatorship: “Only the Bolsheviks and the left wing SR’s admitted in the Constituent Assembly that they could not find a way out of the given situation without resorting to dictatorship. Between 1918 and 1921 there was no political force in Russia that would not have tried to stabilize the situation and its position through dictatorial measures were they to ascend to power, or to do what they would have been its equivalent, create the order appropriate to their different approach.”(7)

This creation of the single party regime was an effective rejection of the initial aims of the Bolsheviks which was to create a commune state. Lenin’s work ‘State and Revolution’ represented the most detailed articulation of this approach, and consequently was elaborated in its concrete form as being Soviet democracy: “Lenin situated the takeover of power not only in the context of current social-political realities, or the concrete political state of affairs that unseated the liberal experiments at management of power between February and October 1917, but also in a historical and theoretical dimension. The soviet forms of social government outlined in The State and Revolution, the institutional form of direct democracy “recognized” by the Bolsheviks in the spontaneously organized base of power, stood ready to defend the revolution in the aftermath of a victorious conclusion of the insurrection.”(8) But the conditions to realise the vision of State and Revolution was undermined by the polarised situation in which defence of the revolution against opposition became primary. The result was the repression of the prospect of the realisation of socialism from below and instead the pragmatic acceptance of the contradictions of socialism from above: “No doubt, whatever the real political alternatives were on the day that followed the successful insurgency, it was no longer the “philosophical” main issue of The State and Revolution that – in essence – made it to the functional agenda. No debates on what the self-governing system of a future socialism ensued. The primary, practical question of the day was the military and political self-defence of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, for the restoration of “despotic capitalism” had to be averted at all costs.”(9)

It could be argued that the Left Communists and Workers Opposition attempted to uphold the vision of the conception of socialism from below. But the excesses of socialism from above meant that the principled relationship between socialism from above and socialism from below had not been established. On the one hand Bolshevik justification of socialism from above meant the repudiation of the importance of popular democracy and the rejection of the role of the institutions of revolution. The state became the most important instrument of economic and political activity, and replaced the initiative of popular and mass democracy. On the other hand the significance of socialism from below has been reduced to the dynamic actions of the working class under capitalism, as Paul Mason explains how the militant aim of autonomy replaced the perspective of power and the transformation of society in democratic socialist terms.(10) Consequently the discussion that Macnair develops about the merits of socialism from above in relation to socialism from below never took place in any systematic form because Stalinism and Social Democracy represented the former and the militant working class of various periods expressed the latter. In this present period of complex social transformation the very prospect of socialism has been seriously questioned, but let us assume that the prospect of revolutionary change is still credible and possible, and therefore the question of the principled balance between socialism from above and socialism from below will still be a central issue, as Olin Wright outlines: “Today, few socialists believe that comprehensive statist central planning is a viable structure for realizing socialist goals. Nevertheless, statist socialism remains an important component of any likely process of social empowerment. The state will remain central to the provision of a wide range of public goods, from health to education to public transportation. The central question for socialists, then, is the extent to which these aspects of social provision can effectively be brought under the control of a democratically empowered civil society.”(11)

In other words an important problem of any process of transition to socialism will be about ensuring the accountability of the state to the institutions of democracy. The centralisation of the economy, because of extensive nationalisation, may result in the generation of the political power of the revolutionary elite. However, this prospect can be overcome if the state is accountable to the organs of popular mass democracy. Poulantzas suggests that this prospect of democratic development of the revolutionary process can be advanced if the organs of the state and popular democracy, or representative democracy, are identical and not differentiated as in connection to a classic dual power strategy: “For state power to be taken, a mass struggle must have unfolded in such a way as to modify the relationship of forces within the state apparatuses, themselves the strategic site of political struggle. For a dual power type of strategy, however, the decisive shift in the relationship of forces takes place not within the State but between the State and the masses outside. In the democratic road to socialism, the long process of taking power essentially consists in the spreading, development, reinforcement, coordination and direction of those diffuse centres of resistance which the masses always possess within the state networks, in such a way that they become the real centres of power on the strategic terrain of the State.”(12)

Consequently, in accordance with this latter conception, the differentiation between socialism from above and below is overcome because the masses are able to establish central influence within the state by means of representative democracy. The prospect of the emergence of a party elite is undermined because the masses have established an important influence within the state because of democratic action. Any divisions between leaderships and the rank and file do not amount to the elitist rigidities of the differences between socialism from above and socialism from below. This is because the dual power strategy has been rejected which led to this hierarchical difference. The argument is that during the October revolution the party elite dominated the state apparatus whilst the working class was influential in the organs of popular democracy in relation to the application of the dual power strategy. This distinction between socialism from above and socialism from below can only be overcome when the state is accountable to the organs of representative democracy and the institutions of popular democracy. However, the problem with this argument is that it remains an ideal and has not been realised in practice. In contrast, the dual power strategy was implemented in the period of the Russian revolution of 1917. It could be argued that the primary political limitation of the installation of the revolutionary regime was not that of dual power, which was an attempt to reconcile the role of the state with the influence of the organs of popular democracy like the Soviets, but instead the primary problem was the rejection of the importance of democracy because of the generation of monolithic single party rule. In this context socialism from below was never realised, and instead the only dynamic and effective principle was the realisation of socialism from above via the creation of the Bolshevik party regime.

In relation to this argument, Wright is suggesting that the central political question for any revolutionary regime is the subordination of the power of the state to the imperatives of the organs of democratic accountability. This prospect will be enhanced if the economic role of the state is decentralised, and industrial democracy accompanies the influence of a process of popular political organs. In this manner the forces of civil society will outweigh the importance of the state. Or, the significance of socialism from below will define the activity of socialism from above. However, if nationalisation is not accompanied by industrial democracy, and therefore state centralisation becomes the defining feature of the economy, and strict party control of the political institutional forms accompanies this situation, then developments will be dictated by the importance of socialism from above. Wright’s perspective is that the accountability of the state to the organs of democracy can overcome the dynamic of consolidation of socialism from above. But this requires that the character of the economy does not take a statist form and instead the state is subordinated to the importance of de-centralised industrial democracy and popular political democracy. However there is an important strategic problem because the very character of the revolutionary process could result in the formation of an authoritarian state, and the related promotion of socialism from above.

Wright argues that the conception of violent class struggle and possible civil war can only result in the domination of the single party elite. He contends that this process would mean the demise of the prospect of democratic socialism: “Some revolutionary socialists have believed that a turn to one party authoritarian rule during a transition from capitalism need not destroy the possibility of the subsequent evolution of meaningful egalitarian democracy. Historical experience suggests that this is very unlikely: the concentration of power and unaccountability that accompanies the abrogation of multi-party representative democracy and the “rule of law” generates new rules of the game and institutional forms in which ruthlessness is rewarded, democratic values are marginalized, dissent is dealt with repressively, and the kinds of autonomous capacities for collective action in civil society needed for democracy are destroyed. The legacies of such practices during the difficult times of transition make a democratic socialist destination impossible.”(13)

However it is dogmatic to assume that every revolutionary process can only be successful in terms of the role of violence and the establishment of a single party dictatorship. These aspects were present in the period of the October revolution because of the legacy of authoritarian Tsarism and the unfavourable economic and political conditions. But the importance of democratic forms in the societies of advanced capitalism may enable revolutionary change to be peaceful and based on the goal of the extension of democracy, whilst expressing a conscious wariness about establishing single party rule. Indeed, it could be argued that if we consider revolution an inherently authoritarian act then socialism becomes impossible because the most we can democratically expect in terms of actual improvements are reforms. This is the effective argument of Social democracy, but Wright rejects this viewpoint because he considers democratic socialism to be the possible outcome of parliamentary electoral methods. Revolutionary Marxists would have serious doubts about this approach, but what we consider to be crucial is whether a mass movement can be created that is able to promote revolutionary change.

Meszaros outlines the conditions for the success of the class struggle in the following terms: “Obviously, a transformation of this magnitude cannot be accomplished without the conscious dedication of a revolutionary movement to the most challenging historic task of all, capable of being sustained against all adversity, since engaging in it is bound to rouse the fierce hostility of all major forces of the capitalist system. It is for this reason that the movement in question cannot be simply a political party orientated toward securing parliamentary concessions, which as a rule turn out to be nullified sooner or later by the extra-parliamentary vested interests of the established order prevailing also in parliament. The socialist movement cannot possibly succeed in the face of the hostility of such forces unless it is rearticulated as a revolutionary mass movement, consciously active in all forms of political and social struggle: local, country-wide and global/international. A revolutionary mass movement capable of fully utilising the parliamentary opportunities when available, limited though they might be under the present circumstances, and above all not shirking back from asserting the necessary demands of defiant extra-Parliamentary action.”(14)

An implicit point being made is that the relationship between revolutionary party and mass movement is based on the principles of socialism from below. The role of the party is to stimulate the development of popular organs of struggle which will take the initiative in the development of class conflict. It will be the effectiveness of the mass movement that will determine whether the prospect of transition to socialism can be realised. If the party attempts to dictate activity this can only undermine the ability of the mass movement to develop the capacity to overcome the domination of capitalism. Instead the impetus of socialism from below is vital if the balance of class forces is to become favourable for revolutionary change. The crucial assumption is that the dynamic and democratic character of the process of transition to socialism will influence the post-revolutionary situation. It is the strategic importance of socialism from below in the class struggle that will create the dynamics for the development of democratic socialism. Instead of the dictates of the Leninist party, the mass movement has the following characteristics: “Socialism from below means being concerned with those forms of activity and organisation that empower people, which allow them to develop the confidence, ideas and skills which might allow them to actively participate in the democratic management of society.”(15) The effective argument being made is that if mass struggles do not encourage the dynamics of socialism from below they are more likely to fail and be defeated by the forces of capital. It could be argued that this is a dogmatic perspective, but the same point could be made about Wright’s contention that popular revolution has become unrealistic, and even if it was successful can only result in new forms of authoritarian rule.

What is crucial is the question of the relationship between the party and the mass movement. If the party is in a position to simply instruct a tame mass movement, the latter will not develop and become capable of establishing its own initiatives. The very role of the party should be to promote the influence of socialism within the emerging mass movement. In this manner any aspect of socialism from above is replaced by the alternative of socialism from below. In this manner the mass movement also provides glimpses of what the future society could be like, and its democratic character presumes similar aspects in the post-capitalist society. However, in order that this development can occur, the revolutionary party has a vital role to play in providing powerful arguments in favour socialism and against capitalism. One of the most important problems is the influence of bourgeois ideology and scepticism about socialism. This could be considered to be an argument in favour of socialism from above, but this situation would seem to be unavoidable until the actual creation of a militant mass movement occurs. Unfortunately the various parties neglect this task because they reject an understanding that their primary tasks are connected to the promotion of mass struggle. They effectively reject the advice of Meszaros which is to encourage the formation of a movement dedicated to the offensive for socialism. In this context the controversy over socialism from above and socialism from below is a diversion because the first task of the party is to create a popular socialist culture that can encourage the creation of mass struggles with revolutionary aims. Until this task has some form of success the very dynamics of socialism from below will not be realised. It is not possible to have forms of socialist from below without the influence of socialist culture. This is precisely why Meszaros hints that the first strategic problem is to establish connections between the revolutionary party and the potential forms of the mass movement. This connection can only take place in terms of the genuine acceptance of Marxist ideas. There is no short-cut in this process, and instead Marxism has to establish its ideological hegemony without imposing its organisational and political norms on the emerging mass movement. What is crucial is the creation of a situation in which the mass movement is able to generate its own socialist perspective without involving the dominant influence of the party. The very role of the party is to promote the ability of the mass movement to create the dynamics of its own form of socialism from below.

Macnair outlines an important reason why the various Marxist organisations are unable to support this task because of their rigid adherence to what he defines as the Comintern model. He contends that this represents the justification of elitism in relation to how the connection between party and class is envisaged: “The Comintern model……..muddled up the two issues of the coordination function and the leadership role of having ideas first, and fetishized a ‘combination view’, in which the party as the advanced part of the working class not merely led the class in the sense of having ideas first, but also performed the coordination role in relation to the class as a whole; and, further, that the party politically represented the class as a whole, as against ‘backward’ particular sections of the class which disagreed with it.”(16) It would seem that he has rejected the perspective of socialism from above, but in an eccentric manner he denies this conclusion because he contends that the Comintern model has been adopted by advocates of socialism from below. Instead he upholds a mythical conception of socialism from above that is receptive to the impulses of socialism from below. In order to study this conclusion with seriousness we can agree that the history of Trotskyism has been characterised by bureaucratic regimes that reject the principles of socialism from below. However, this is not because socialism from below is unrealistic as Macnair claims and is instead because of the attempts of various leaderships to uphold their domination and deny the possibility of challenges which could undermine their situation. Furthermore, these bureaucratic organisations have never become an influence on the working class movement. This point could not be made about the Comintern. Was it always characterised by authoritarianism?

The Second Congress of the Comintern has an important resolution entitled the: ‘Role of the Communist Party in Proletarian Revolution.’(17) This resolution is written by Zinoviev and represents his perspective about the relationship of party and class. He outlines in uncontroversial fashion how the party represents the advanced sections of the working class and attempts to develop its influence within the class as a whole. Furthermore, he indicates that there are important periods in history when the party has to defend a position that is unpopular within the majority of the working class, such as opposition to the imperialist war. But he then conceives of proletarian revolution in terms of the dynamic role of the party and the more passive conduct of the majority of the working class: “The Communist International firmly rejects the view that the proletariat can accomplish its revolution without an independent political party. The class struggle is always a political struggle. The goal of this struggle, which inevitably develops into a civil war, is the conquest of political power. However, political power can only be seized, organized and channelled by a political party. Only if the proletariat is led by an organized and experienced party which has definite aims and a worked out programme for immediate action in the sphere of both internal and external affairs can the seizure of power be a starting point for a long period of communist construction instead of merely a chance episode.”(18) The resolution does not deny the importance of Soviets for the revolutionary process, but it still subordinates the Soviets to the role of the party: “A strong Communist Party is essential if the Soviet are to fulfil their historical mission.”(19) And: “The rise of the Soviets as the main historically determined form of the dictatorship of the proletariat in no way detracts from the leading role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution.”(20)

This perspective of proletarian revolution based on an emphasis on the primary role of the Communist Party was shown to be a simplistic caricature when applied to Western Europe. The various Communist parties could not obtain more than minority support, and the various Social Democratic organisations were hegemonic within the working class. Hence the idea that the process of revolution in Western Europe would be some type of replica of the Russian events (and Zinoviev’s conception of party revolution was also controversial) was discredited by the more complex situation in Western Europe. Furthermore, the economic recession meant the working class was on the defensive rather than aspiring to realise political power. Hence the Third Congress of the Communist International adopted a programme of action that recognised the importance of the trade unions as basic defence organisations of the working class that could be transformed into the strategic basis of the struggle to overthrow capitalism: “The main tactic of the trade unions has to be the direct action of the revolutionary masses and their organisations against the capitalist system…..The aim of the revolutionary class trade unions is therefore to make direct action an instrument in the education and military training of the working masses for the social revolution and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”(21) The defensive actions of the working class, such as strikes to maintain wages, would become transformed into more offensive mass actions in order to oppose capitalism. The workers should form factory committees that would organise occupations against the offensive measures of the employers to either reduce wages or create redundancies, and if these militant actions were successful the aim should be to establish workers control of production: “In the coming period the entire economic struggle of the working class must be conducted around the slogan of workers control over production. The workers should fight for the immediate introduction of workers control and not wait for the government and ruling class to think up some alternative.”(22)

The programme of action also outlines the importance of a close relationship between the trade unions and the Communist party, but its emphasis concerns the dynamic role of the working class at the point of production, or being able to go from a defensive situation to an offensive possibility to overthrow the system via the establishment of workers control of production. Presumably, the role of the Communist Party is to encourage this development, and the previous party conception of revolution supported at the Second Congress of the Communist International is quietly rejected. In other words the strategic understanding that the working class should passively follow the dynamic role of the Communist Party, or socialism from above, has been replaced by a perspective of socialism from below, in which the basis for revolutionary change is connected to the increased militancy of the trade unions and the role of workers in struggle.

The Fourth Congress, in its ‘Theses On Comintern Tactics’ acknowledges that the perspectives of the Third Congress were not realised because of the success of the offensive of capital and the victory of counterrevolutionary Italian Fascism.(23) However, the approach of socialism from below is not rejected and instead it is reaffirmed: “In these circumstances the main directive of the Third World Congress is still completely valid: to achieve an increase of Communist influence among the majority of the working class and to involve its most decisive sections in struggle.”(24) But this standpoint means adapting the strategic approach to the continued influence of Social Democracy, the recent success of the employer’s offensive, and the ebb in support for the Communist Party. The result is the call for the united front which represents unity with the forces of reformism in order to organise around the immediate and basis issues of the class struggle. This approach does not represent unacceptable compromise because the ultimate aim of the united front is to strive for the formation of a workers government: “Such a workers government is possible only if it is born out of the struggle of the masses and is supported by combative workers organisations formed by the most oppressed sections of workers at grass roots level……It is obvious that the formation of a genuine workers government, and the continued existence of any such government committed to revolutionary politics, must lead to bitter struggle with the bourgeoisie or even to civil war.”(25) Thus the united front is not considered to be a diplomatic agreement with the forces of Social Democracy and the trade unions that will diminish the dynamism of the class struggle. Instead it is the defensive form of the class struggle that can culminate in the formation of a workers government. This modified strategy is still an expression of socialism from below and represents what could be possible if the Communist workers and Social Democrats unite to struggle against the employers.

Consequently between the second and fourth congress of the Communist International, the experience of the class struggle in Western Europe had indicated that the rigid conception of party revolution was both a simplification of the revolutionary process and unsuccessful. Instead it was necessary to develop a more dynamic understanding of the class struggle that emphasised the active role of the working class. This approach was elaborated at the Third Congress, and modified in order to relate to changing circumstances at the Fourth Congress. However the leadership of Zinoviev at the Fifth Congress meant these strategic lessons became rejected. Nevertheless the programme adopted at the Sixth Congress still expressed some sense of the importance of socialism from below.

Trotsky increasingly criticised what he considered to be the opportunism of the Comintern under Stalin’s leadership. His approach expresses the importance of the party in the revolutionary process: “If, however, the party of the working class, in spite of the favourable conditions, reveals itself incapable of leading the proletariat to the seizure of power, the life of society will continue necessarily upon capitalist foundations – until a new crisis, a new war, perhaps until the complete disintegration of European civilisation.”(26) The problem is that this Communist party has become opportunist, and is increasingly unwilling to provide leadership in relation to revolutionary opportunities. Hence the Transitional Programme attempts to provide theoretical resolution of these tensions in terms of the standpoint of objectivism, or the primacy of objective laws of history generating the success of the revolutionary process. This understanding is connected to an emphasis on the role of socialism from below: “The orientation of the masses is determined first by the objective conditions of decaying capitalism and second by the treacherous policies of the old workers organisations. Of these factors, the first of course is the decisive one: the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus. No matter how the methods of the social betrayers differ….they will never succeed in breaking the revolutionary will of the proletariat…. As time goes on, their desperate efforts to hold back the wheels of history will demonstrate more clearly to the masses that the crisis of proletarian leadership, having become the crisis of mankind’s culture can be resolved only by the Fourth International.”(27) In this favourable conditions for revolution, the programme of action, the transitional demands, will enable the mobilisation of the working class to struggle for socialism: “Only with the help of such systematic, persistent, indefatigable, courageous agitational and organizational work, always on the basis of the experience of the masses themselves, is it possible to root out from their consciousness the traditions of submissiveness and passivity…to raise the self-confidence of the exploited and oppressed……and pave the road for the conquest of power by the proletariat.”(28)

This conception underestimated the problems in the revolutionary process and over-estimated the extent of revolutionary consciousness and related willingness to struggle against capitalism. In this sense the emphasis on socialism from below was probably exaggerated and the role of the party and the struggle against bourgeois and reformist ideology was underestimated. The result of this understanding was that the so-called historical process become an almost inevitable dynamic for the success of revolution. This was effectively an emphasis on historical necessity and the open-ended character of history was denied. Thus the following comments were advocated with iron certainty and the difficulties involved are glossed over: “Each of the transitional demands should, therefore, lead to one and the same political conclusion: the workers need to break with all traditional parties of the bourgeoisie in order, jointly with the farmers, to break their power.”(29) And: “It is impossible in advance to foresee what will be the concrete stages of the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses. The sections of the Fourth International should critically orient themselves at each new stage, and advance such slogans as will aid the striving of the workers for independent politics, deepen the class character of these politics, destroy reformist and pacifist illusions, strengthen the connection of the vanguard with the masses, and prepare the revolutionary conquest of power.”(30)

The problem with these comments is they do not allow for the complexities of the class struggle, and instead Trotsky can only contemplate victory, or at the very least the inevitability of an attempt at insurrection. It is true that the perspective of socialism from below has been outlined in terms of the importance of transitional demands, but this standpoint has been rendered objectivist and determinist in terms of the one-dimensional understanding of the outcome of the laws of history. What he has possibly glossed over most significantly is the inability of the parties of the Fourth International to establish an influence on the class struggle. Developments within the class struggle occurred without the role of the Fourth International, and the result is an historic impasse, or even important defeats. Ultimately he has to defend the catastrophist view that the development of inter-imperialist war will promote the cause of international revolution, and so he rejects the possibility that this development may even strengthen one of the imperialist blocs: “At the beginning of the war the sections of the Fourth International will inevitably feel themselves isolated: every war takes the national masses unawares and impels them to the side of the government apparatus. The internationalists will have to swim against the stream. However, the devastation and misery brought about by the new war, which in the first months will far outstrip the bloody horrors of 1914-18, will quickly prove sobering. The discontent of the masses and their revolt will grow by leaps and bounds. The sections of the Fourth International will be found at the head of the revolutionary tide. The programme of transitional demands will gain burning actuality. The problem of the conquest of power by the proletariat will loom in its full actuality.”(31)

This prediction was falsified by events. It was always over-optimistic and ignored the strength of counter-revolution and the importance of the ideological aspect of the military conflict, of democracy versus fascism. However, what was most problematical was that Trotsky assumed the ability to define the course of events without allowing for counter-prevailing trends. The result was dogmatism and a rigid interpretation of historical necessity. Hence, limitations of historical materialism outweighed the importance of the emphasis on the significance of socialism from below. The point is that the conception of the laws of history is utilised in order to deny the importance of the political problems and limitations that may undermine the realisation of revolutionary goals. Hence the reconciliation of history with strategy, via the role of transitional demands, means that the success of mass mobilisation, or socialism from below, is inherent within the favourable objective conditions. In other words, the aims of the revolutionary process are likely to be victorious because the imperatives of history are effectively ‘on the side’ of the role of the working class in struggle.

This approach is inferior to the recognition by the early Comintern of the difficulties involved in the class struggle, such as the employer’s offensive in conditions of recession and the political strength of Social Democracy, which outweighed the importance of the minority influence of the Communist Parties. In contrast, Trotsky is arguing in the Transitional Programme that reformism and opportunism will be overcome by the imperatives of the objective process of history. Hence, the forces of socialism from below will be successful because the economic crisis automatically generates the political conditions that can result in the success of the revolution. The only problem concerns whether a connection will be established between the working class and the revolutionary party. In contrast, the Comintern of the early 1920’s does not assume that an economic crisis inherently suggests the victory of the revolutionary process, and instead the validity of strategy assumes vital importance. Can the united front be successful, and result in a workers government? Trotsky does not allow for this type of caution in 1938, and instead assumes that strategy can be successful because of favourable historical and economic conditions. Hence it is almost taken for granted that the working class will support transitional demands, and so become the instrument of history. But the Comintern in the early 1920’s does not uphold these types of historical guarantees, and so more caution is displayed about the possibilities to develop a successful united front.

Trotsky in the early 1920’s shares the caution of the Comintern. For example, he comments: “A policy aimed to secure the united front does not of course contain automatic guarantees that unity in action will actually be attained in all instances. On the contrary, in many cases and perhaps even the majority of cases, organizational agreements will be only half-attained or not at all. But it is necessary that the struggling masses should always be given the opportunity of convincing themselves that the non-achievement of unity in action was not due to our formalistic irreconcilability but due to the lack of real will to struggle on the part of the reformists.”(32) He is aware that the very revolutionary status of the Communist Parties may undermine the possibility to develop the united front. Hence the demand to establish political independence in relation to propaganda and agitation may result in the demise of the united front. He is also aware that the expectations of immediate world revolution following the Russian revolution have been disappointed, and so led to an ebb in the class struggle. This defensive situation has led to the necessity for unity in action, and the implication is that only success in this context will result in the realisation of more advanced forms of the class struggle. There are no historical guarantees, only the issue of the success of the current strategy and its promise of movement to higher forms of struggle: “If the workers are today demanding that for the sake of the struggle against the bourgeoisie the Communists reach an agreement with the Independents and with the Social Democrats, then on the morrow – to the extent that the movement grows in its mass scope – these same workers will become convinced that that only the Communist Party offers them leadership in the revolutionary struggle.”(33) It is interesting that the question of success is posed in terms of what might occur rather than historical guarantees. Only ‘if’ the united front is successful will higher and greater revolutionary possibilities occur, but this prospect is dependent on achieving results in the realisation of defensive tasks.

In other words the shift in emphasis towards a strategy of socialism from below was connected to the implicit elaboration of a conception of history that was open-ended and did not assume the inherent success of developments in the class struggle. Only if the working class mobilised in terms of trade union action, combined with the formation of the united front, would it be possible to maintain that progress had been made against the forces of capitalism. However, it was entirely possible that strike action would not occur, or there would be failure in constructing the united front, that suggests advances in the class struggle had not occurred. The Communist International was recognising that success in the international revolution was not inevitable and that capitalism was more durable than anticipated. Establishing the influence of the various Communist Parties did not mean that the overthrow of capitalism would occur in the short-term. This sober recognition of the difficulties involved in the struggle for revolution went together with an emphasis on the importance of socialism from below. Only the mass mobilisation of the working class would create the most promising conditions for the overthrow of a tenacious capitalism.

Trotsky outlined his most detailed understanding of the revolutionary process in his: “The History of the Russian Revolution.”(34) He argues that the October revolution was different to a Blanquist conspiracy carried out by an elite when he writes: “Conspiracy is ordinarily contrasted to insurrection as the deliberate undertaking of a minority to a spontaneous movement of the majority. And it is true that a victorious insurrection, which can only be the act of a class called to stand at the head of the nation, is widely separated both in method and historic significance from a governmental overturn accomplished by conspirators acting in concealment from the masses.”(35) However the October revolution was an insurrection that had aspects of conspiracy, or a high level of secret organisation: “But a mass insurrection can be foreseen and prepared. It can be organised in advance. In this case the conspiracy is subordinate to the insurrection, serves it, smoothes its path, hastens its victory. The higher the political level of a revolutionary movement and the more serious its leadership, the greater will be the place occupied by conspiracy in a popular insurrection.”(36) This analysis seems to defend the view that the party carried out the revolution of the proletariat in terms of the significance of high levels of organisation, including the role of conspiracy. However, Trotsky maintains that this approach is not justification of the Blanquist conception of revolution by an elite. The revolution is not a minority affair merely carried out by the party, but instead only becomes possible when it has the support of the majority of the working class. In this context only when the Soviets, the popular organs of the proletariat, establish a popular support for the revolution does it become possible. But once this support is realised, the organisational form can be expressed as a conspiracy. The conspiracy is the insurrection of the working class organised in Soviets: “The organisation by means of which the proletariat can both overthrow the old power and replace it, is the soviets…..The soviets are organs of preparation of the masses for insurrection, organs of insurrection, and after the victory organs of government.”(37) However, in order that the Soviets realise this potential they have to become an expression of majority support for the revolutionary party. Until that time it is quite possible for the Soviets to express both the popular power of the working class and support for the bourgeois government: “When headed by a revolutionary party the soviet consciously and in good season strives towards a conquest of power. Accommodating itself to changes in the political situation and the mood of the masses, it gets ready the military bases of the insurrection, unites the shock troops upon a single scheme of action, works out a plan for the offensive and the final assault. And this means bringing organised conspiracy into mass insurrection.”(38)

This perspective outlines in dialectical terms the relationship between socialism from above and socialism from below. Without the Soviets, which are an expression of the popular will of the working class in struggle, the revolution could not occur. However this militant spontaneity of the mass movement is not sufficient for the success of the class struggle. What is also crucial is the influence of the revolutionary party. It is necessary to establish a political and organisational unity between party and soviets in order that the aim of revolution is consciously articulated and becomes a strategic aim of the Soviet. The party and organs of the Soviet act together in order to develop an insurrection, which may take the form of a conspiracy, in order to overcome the dominant political power of the bourgeoisie. Hence the act of revolution is a process of interaction between party and soviet. Without the influence of the party, the Soviet may be inclined to support reformism and bourgeois democracy, but without the role of the Soviet the revolutionary party is marginalised and lacks the influence to argue in favour of the overthrow of capitalism. Thus Trotsky is denying the conception of party revolution, the party cannot substitute itself for the class and act independently in order to overthrow the system. Only when the working class has acted in a spontaneous revolutionary manner to establish Soviets does the prospect of revolution become credible. But the act of proletarian revolution cannot occur without the role of the party. The party can articulate the discontent of the working class and argue that the economic and political situation can be improved if the Soviet organises the act of revolution.

In other words the working class requires a leadership that can articulate a strategy that generates confidence that the time has matured for the success of the attempt at establishing revolutionary change. This leadership is the party: “The proletariat can become imbued with the confidence necessary for a government overthrow only if a clear prospect opens up before it, only if it has had an opportunity to test out in action a correlation of forces which is changing to its advantage, only if it feels above it a farsighted, firm and confident leadership. This brings us to the last premise – by no means the last in importance – of the conquest of power: the revolutionary party as a tightly welded and tempered vanguard of the class.”(39) Consequently, the working class aspires for revolutionary change, and the party articulates this aspiration in its plans for the insurrection. Without the increasing conscious discontent of the working class the prospect of revolution would be unlikely to succeed. Thus the ability of the party is in anticipating the most favourable moment for revolution in relation to the increasing consciousness in favour of change within the proletariat.

The methodology utilised by Trotsky means that the conception of party revolution in which the dynamic party expresses the capacities for social change is absurd. In this sense socialism from above is unrealistic because it is a perspective that ignores the importance of the mass movement of the working class organised as a popular will in the Soviets. Consequently the formation of Soviets as a result of the actions of the proletariat in struggle is crucial. Hence socialism from below is the primary dynamic aspect of the revolutionary process, and the role of a mass movement is integral to the possibility of developing struggle to overthrow the political power of capital. It is important to also recognise that Trotsky is not just outlining the role of pure spontaneity, and is instead indicating the significance of the highest level of development of mass struggle, which is the creation of the Soviet. This development represents the democratic expression of the popular will and its opposition to the political power of the bourgeoisie. But this impulse provided by the forces of socialism from below has to be connected with the role of a revolutionary party which can provide the strategy for revolutionary change, and therefore suggests important methods of action like the plan of insurrection. The party also ideologically convinces the working class of the possibility of revolutionary transformation. Thus the party does not impose itself on the working class but instead is an agency to reinforce the logic of the very actions of the forces of popular democracy. In this context the aspect of socialism from above is subordinated to upholding the logic of socialism from below. If the role of socialism from above was about dictating the role of the working class it would represent an elite force. This situation did not occur, and instead the relationship between party and class in the October revolution was provided by the importance of the Soviets. The legitimacy and character of the revolutionary action was provided by Soviet democracy which had acquired a Bolshevik majority.

It has been argued that the role of the Soviets provided the pretext for a Bolshevik coup. But the point is that the Bolsheviks could not have acted without the importance of their relationship to the Soviet which expressed the political will of the workers and soldiers. The Military Revolutionary Committee, which organised the insurrection, was created under the auspices of the Soviet. Hence it can be said that for a brief moment in time the actions of the Bolsheviks corresponded to the popular will of the working class in terms of the role of Soviet democracy and the majority in this institution that favoured the development of revolutionary change. But Trotsky in the mid 1920’s adopted a position that seemed to express the standpoint of socialism from above: “But events have proved that without a party capable of directing the proletarian revolution, the revolution itself is rendered impossible. The proletariat cannot seize power by a spontaneous uprising.”(40) His later study of the October revolution showed that this formulation was one-sided and was based on the rejection of the importance of the working class via the role of the Soviet. In his earlier work Trotsky was trying to show that without the role of Lenin, the revolution may not have happened. However, when he came to study the events of the October revolution in a more scholarly manner he was able to indicate that what was important was the relationship of the party and class, via the role of the Soviets. Only with the development of the impulses of socialism from below in their highest form, the creation of Soviets, was it possible for revolution to occur. It was in this context that the influence of the revolutionary party became crucial and it could provide the vital strategy for the realisation of ‘All Power to the Soviets’. It was regression from this condition that led to the realisation of socialism from above, or monolithic single party rule.

In conclusion it is necessary to elaborate what we would mean by a society based on the principles of socialism from below. Our view is that it is possible to combine the role of leadership, such as management, with dedication to the principles of cooperation and solidarity within the workplace. Hence the alienation generated by the process of capital accumulation and the primacy of profit-making can be replaced by self-management that aspires to realise the common good in the process of production and generation of quality consumer goods. This situation would not mean that authority is no longer required, instead the role of authority and expertise will become based on the influence of collective decision making and the dedication generated by the role of conscious cooperation.(41) In other words, management is not distinct from the role of the workers within the workplace, but instead they are connected by common aims and objectives. The point is that the role of industrial democracy means that the managers do not become a distinct class dedicated to the realisation of profit at the expense of the workers. Consequently, the logic of socialism from above is the justification of exploitation of the workforce. It is socialism from below that ensures that this does not happen via the role and importance of industrial democracy and the accountability of the managers to the workers.

Lebowitz does seem to justify utopian aspects in his conception of socialism such as the denial of the significance of self-interest because of its opposition to cooperation and solidarity. This dogmatic view is a rejection of the biological fact that we are individuals and so have an inherent sense of self interest. What would be more constructive is to reconcile the interests of the individual with those of society. However, socialism from above cannot establish this relationship because it is based on an emphasis of self-interest at the expense of the requirements of the community. Instead workers management, or a limited aspect of socialism from above, that is connected to the influence of industrial democracy or socialism from below, will ensure that the principled balance is realised between individual and community: “In its turn, worker and community management ensures that decisions are not conceived and executed through a “systematic and hierarchic division of labour” but rather are democratic, participatory, and protagonistic. For the means of production to remain social property, it is essential to prevent the emergence of a “trained caste” above workers, “absorbing the intelligence of the masses” and developing the capacity to rule production in place of workers.”(42) The point being made is that the influence of socialism from below, the role of industrial democracy, imposes a limit on the significance of socialism from above which ensures that the relations of production are participatory and do not become the basis of the division between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. In contrast, socialism from above which is not regulated in this manner becomes the basis to erode solidarity within production and instead generates exploitation and alienation. The only genuine socialism is that which is popular and expresses real cooperation within the relations of production.

The other aspect of the transition to socialism involves the relationship between the party and the working people. Lebowitz argues that the party can provide leadership and guidance to the various communities and workplaces that are involved in attempting to overcome the domination of capital. However, this leadership should not deny the dynamism and importance of the struggle for socialism from below. Instead the relationship should be one in which the emerging revolutionary state encourages the various rank and file struggles to realise their potential and to become an integral part of the realisation of socialist relations of production: “But think about this relationship between a political instrument and the movements from below. It is clearly not a hierarchical….relationship. The leadership that a political instrument can provide fosters revolutionary practice only by continuously learning from below. There is, in short, a process of interaction, a dialectic between the political instrument and popular movements. By itself, the former becomes a process of command from above; by itself the latter cannot develop a concept of the whole – that is, it cannot transcend localism. In short articulation of the two is essential – another case of the necessity to walk on two legs.”(43) The very role of the democratic state is to promote forms of socialism from below, or the importance of cooperation and solidarity within the relations of production and political structures. In contrast socialism from above without this relationship to socialism from below would result in re-creating the character of the bourgeois state and so encourage the emergence of Capitalism. Only the most democratic of state, or a participatory state, can promote the development of socialism.

This is the lesson of the history of the USSR. The effective imposition of so-called socialism from above is the rejection of genuine socialism that is based on participatory democracy within the economy and political forms. This means that socialism from below is the dominant aspect of this development, in which any necessary aspects of socialism from above are accountable to both workers and consumers. It is true that socialism from below is unrealistic without aspects of socialism from above, but the latter can become bureaucratic and repressive if it is not strictly limited in power by the forces of socialism from below. This point can be made about both the revolutionary process and the character of the socialist society. Hence, Macnair is wrong to deny the validity of socialism from below and instead what has to be established are the most credible and practical forms of this approach. Historically, socialism from below may be related to the role of anarchist theory, but its actual importance has been established by the problems of the Russian revolution. This concept also has enormous importance when trying to outline the contemporary importance of a future society.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Mike Macnair: Socialism from below: a delusion, In Weekly Worker August 13th 2015, number 1071, p8-9

(2)ibid p8

(3)ibid p9

(4)ibid p9

(5)ibid p9

(6)Communist Workers Organisation: Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation: London, 2010 p34-44

(7)Tamas Krausz: Reconstructing Lenin, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2014 p218

(8)ibid p207

(9)ibid p207

(10Paul Mason: PostCapitalism, Allen Lane, London, 2015 p192-196

(11)Erik Olin Wright: Envisioning Real Utopias, Verso, London, 2010 p133

(12)Nicos Poulantzas: State, Power, Socialism, Verso, London, 1980 p258

(13)Wright op cit p318

(14)Istvan Meszaros: Historical Actuality of the Socialist Offensive, Bookmarks, London, 2010 p29-30

(15)Dan Swain: Socialism From Below, in RS21.org.uk summer 2015 p13-15. Quote p13

(16)Macnair op cit p9

(17)Third International: The Role of the Communist Party in Proletarian Revolution, in: Theses, Resolutions and Manifestoes of the First Four Congresses of the Third International, Ink Links, London 1980 p68-75

(18)ibid p69-70

(19)ibid p72

(20Ibid p72

(21)Programme of Action (Third World Congress) p269

(22)ibid p272

(23)These On Comintern Tactics (Fourth Congress) p388-409

(24)ibid p395

(25)ibid p398

(26)Leon Trotsky: On France, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1979 p71

(27)Leon Trotsky: Transitional Programme, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1974 p113

(28)ibid p125

(29)ibid p135

(30)ibid p135

(31)ibid p132

(32)Trotsky: The United Front In: The First Five Years of the Communist International, Pathfinder Press, New York 1972 p95

(33)Flood Tide ibid p83

(34)Leon Trotsky: The History of the Russian Revolution, Pluto Press, London, No date,

(35)ibid p1017

(36)ibid p1018

(37)ibid p1021

(38)ibid p1021

(39)ibid p1024

(40)Leon Trotsky: Lessons of October, New Park, London, 1993 p3

(41)Michael Lebowitz: The Socialist Alternative, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2010 p60

(42)ibid p87

(43)ibid p162