THE DSA WELCOMES THE ELECTION OF JEREMY CORBYN AS LEADER OF THE LABOUR PARTY

The election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party represents a genuinely important development which could transform British politics. His election was as a result of the democratic voting procedure which allowed the LP members and supporters to register their opposition to the right wing politics of the leadership of the LP. Unfortunately this remarkable victory does not immediately transform the LP. It is still a bourgeois organisation which has been shown by the criticism of Corbyn’s politics by the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The lack of loyalty displayed towards the new leader by the PLP has been astonishing, and reveals open contempt and the manifestation of hostility. Corbyn is in a beleaguered position and the right wing conspire about how they can bring about his overthrow. Essentially he is a left wing Bonaparte presiding over a bourgeois Parliamentary organisation. But he has allies, many new people have joined the LP because of his election, and the constituency LP’s supported him enthusiastically. The constituency LP, in alliance with the trade unions, represents an alternative pole of attraction which could act to bring about the democratic socialist transformation of the LP.

In his first week as leader, Corbyn has made mistakes alongside displaying good judgement and maturity about his role. He made the mistake of rejecting the opportunity to appear on political television programmes like the Andrew Marr show. He should also had refused to listen to establishment criticism of his reluctance to sing the national anthem and maintained his individual right to act according to his own views. He should also have rejected joining the Privy Council because of its links to the monarchy and the establishment. In other words he should have been more resolute about being a new type of politician who rejects the conventions of traditional politics. However, his appearance on Prime Minister’s Question Time was brilliant, in terms of asking questions from members of the public about important issues, but he does not seem to be aware that he can engage in a debate with the Prime Minister. Specifically, he should have rejected Cameron’s defence of economic policy. Despite these criticisms, his selection of the shadow Cabinet showed a combination of flexibility and intransigence. He was right to appoint John Mcdonnell as his shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer. This indicated that the orientation of the shadow Cabinet will be against austerity, defence of the welfare state, and support of the trade unions. He was also right to be inflexible when required and rejected the demands of the PLP to have a free vote about membership of the Shadow Cabinet.

The immediate major concern is that Corbyn and his comrades are contemplating support for the trade unions national chauvinist inclination to vote against the UK membership of the EU on the basis of upholding worker’s rights. This standpoint has nothing to do with actual defence of the interests of workers and instead represents a hypocritical accommodation to the popularity of the right-wing UKIP and its anti EU stance. The only principled defence of worker’s rights is support for the international struggle of working people within the EU in order to advance the realisation of the aim of socialism. In order to uphold this standpoint it will be necessary to vote in favour of membership of the EU. The alternative is a fortress UK that will represent the development of an authoritarian state that would only undermine the ability of the working class to defend its rights.

The present situation is delicate and represents the possible beginning of the struggle for the soul of the LP. Either the forces of the PLP will be ultimately victorious, and so will be able to affirm the bourgeois character of the LP; or alternatively the Constituencies can act to bring about the realisation of genuine socialism. This latter development would mean the LP becoming an integral part of the promotion of struggle against austerity, and Labour Councils would no longer implement the expenditure cuts of the Tory government. Furthermore, the LP conference would vote to reject Blair’s revision of Clause 4 of the constitution, and instead this development means adopting a new clause 4 that upheld the principles of democratic socialism.(1) This would include the aim of replacing capitalism by a genuine socialist society based on industrial democracy, and the promotion of participatory forms of democracy. It is also necessary that the activity of the PLP becomes accountable to the wishes of the Constituency LP’s, which is ultimately expressed by the role of the annual conference.

The forces of the Marxist Left outside the LP have been reluctant to recognise the significance of Corbyn’s election as leader of the LP. Organisations like the SWP have argued that what is important is struggle outside of Parliament like strikes, and so on. They do not seem to have understood that a LP led by a left-wing leader can transform the conditions of working class struggles. The LP can become an important contributor to these struggles rather than being a force for passivity and effective opposition to the development of mass movements outside of Parliament. In this context, it is necessary that the Marxist organisations be prepared to dissolve in order to join the LP. The development of an organised Marxist pole of attraction within the LP can only strengthen its left-wing possibilities, and so facilitate the transformation of the LP into a principled democratic socialist organisation. (To promote this perspective, people from Marxist groups should affiliate with the Labour Party Marxist organisation) However, there will be people who because of their political history will be banned from becoming members of the LP. These people should unite in a single organisation, and therefore put pressure on the LP to act in a principled manner in favour of the development of the class struggle and against capitalism. Hence the influence of Marxism will be felt within and outside the LP. We should also campaign in favour of the right of presently banned organisations having the right to join the LP as affiliated groups.

The major problem of the new Corbyn leadership of the LP is its apparent lack of programme. We know that Corbyn is left wing, and against austerity, but what does he advocate as an alternative to the neoliberal agenda of the Conservatives? There has been vague talk about left-wing Keynesianism, but what does this mean? The political strength of Tony Benn was that he in favour of an articulated conception of democratic socialism as an alternative to Thatcherism. At present, Corbyn has been silent about his overall perspective. Indeed, it could be argued that he was elected as leader of the LP because he was conceived as the rebel candidate. But he has to go from being the rebel and perpetual oppositionist and instead become the advocate of a vision of society that is radically different from that of neo-liberalism. This means outlining the conception of democratic socialism. We do not start from scratch in this regard. We have the works of Marxism, most notably the books of Ralph Miliband and other proponents of democratic socialism. This political task needs to combine the development of attractive policies for winning elections with the elaboration of an understanding of society that is different from capitalism. If this task is not addressed people will not be convinced by the ultimately negative stance of the LP. Primarily it is necessary to indicate that in the battle of ideas it is possible to establish a credible alternative to Toryism. If this task is not addressed the Conservative Party will continue to be considered as being the most practical party when it comes to economic questions. This intellectual hegemony will undermine the prospects of the LP winning the next general election.

One of the most important tasks that confronts Jeremy Corbyn is winning the trust of the Labour voters. The recent propaganda offensive aimed against him is in order to undermine the attempt to develop popular support for Corbyn within the electorate. However, there is one issue that will contribute more than any other to establishing whether he will be able to win the next general election. This is the question of immigration and migration. UKIP was able to attract mass support because of its scare mongering tactics in relation to this issue. The response of the LP at the last election seemed confused and hesitant. The LP needs to reject this confusion and instead proclaim in the most principled and adamant manner that immigration is not a problem. Migrants are welcome to the UK, and the UK should take its fair share of the migrants currently congregating in Europe. However, the real problem is the lack of social resources caused by the economic policies of the Tory government. The LP should promise to build more houses and schools, and provide a more efficient NHS. This promise should be connected to the aim of creating a socialist society that is based on the interests, priorities and concerns of working people.

QUESTIONS OF STRATEGY

Less than two months ago the LP seemed to be going through the motions of a lack lustre leadership contest, and the favourites were uninspiring candidates of the centre-right wing. But something happened, the voice of the people spoke. They wanted the election of the most left-wing candidate, and thousands acted in order to have a voice in the contest. The incredible happened, the most left-wing Labour candidate since Keir Hardie won the vote to be leader, and suddenly politics in the UK were transformed. These drastically changed circumstances meant the Marxist groups – mostly outside of the LP – would have to change their tactics, and therefore come to terms with what had happened. The LP was no longer the demoralised and defeated party of the general election of 2015, and it had acquired a leader who is promising to be part of the struggle to change the character of British politics. What should the attitude be of the Marxist left? On the one hand nothing has changed. It is still very difficult to envisage the possibility of socialist transformation through the gaining of a majority in Parliament. The struggle for revolutionary change will still require the role of mass movements, the development of popular forms of democracy that are extra-Parliamentary, and the generation of the influence of a Marxist party. On the other hand the election of a left wing leader of the LP creates the promise of new possibilities, and promotes the potential that the LP could become an important agency of the realisation of democratic socialism.

In other words options have multiplied and the content of the strategy for change has been enriched and become more complex. It is possible that the LP could change from being an agency that upholds the status quo into a force for genuine social transformation. This prospect is by no means certain, and the PLP will work tirelessly in order to ensure that the LP remains a party of the establishment, and so opposed to any support for radical change. In contrast, the forces of Marxism should recognise that the situation has suddenly become more favourable for the possibility of advancing the aim of the socialist transformation of society. They should not be complacent or conservative and therefore dismiss the importance of these newly created favourable circumstances. Instead as many as possible should attempt to join the LP, and if they are successful in their applications an attempt should be made to organise a Marxist pole of attraction. This tendency would then contribute to the struggle to transform the LP into a force for democratic socialism. However, some of these applications to join the LP will be unsuccessful because of past political history. Hence a revolutionary organisation outside the LP should be created, which as part of its aims will make its own distinctive contribution to prompting the left wing development of the LP. What should be avoided is an unorganised trickle of people from the Marxist groups into the LP. Instead we should seek to ensure the continued maximum organisation of Marxists both inside and outside the LP.

One of the immediate tasks created by the present situation is to rejuvenate the development of a militant struggle against the austerity policy of the Government. The left-wing leadership of the LP, supported by the Marxists and constituency activists, should put pressure onto the trade unions to act to oppose austerity. The present situation of passivity is intolerable and effectively accepts the implementation of the economic policy of the government. This development should mean that Corbyn rejects any temptation to form a cosy relationship with the trade union leaders, and instead he should publicly criticise them for their failure to mobilise a mass movement of opposition against the austerity policy. The new LP leader can utilise his support within the Union rank and file in order to promote the formation of an organised campaign against austerity. The LP should also develop a long term campaign in favour of the entry of migrants into the UK, and in this manner oppose national chauvinism and anti-immigration sentiment. This activity is important because anti-immigration is one of the major aspects of the influence of reactionary ideology within the working class. We cannot promote class consciousness unless we attempt to oppose all those ideas that divide and undermine solidarity within the working class. Lastly, and not least, we should link these campaigns to the struggle to achieve the victory of the LP at the next election. This aim should be connected with the campaign to de-select right wing LP MP’s, and therefore achieve the selection of people who support the interests of the working class. In this manner a truly principled LP will be created that can win the next general election, and be receptive to the introduction of legislation within Parliament that facilitates the process of the overthrow of capitalism. However we are aware that the prospect of socialism is not dependent on the exclusive role of Parliament, and instead it is also vital to build a mass movement of an extra-parliamentary character that can dynamically advance this process of change. This is why it is vital that Marxism should maintain an organisation outside the LP. We should not put all of our eggs in one basket.

It is entirely possible that the pressures of the right-wing influence of the PLP, or the role of the mass media, will undermine the attempts to achieve the left wing transformation of the LP. Defeat at the next election could also create a setback to the attempt to change the LP in a radical manner. These setbacks should not immediately cause Marxists to change this new strategy. We should not relinquish the gains in the LP in a defeatist manner. Instead we should engage in tenacious struggle in order to bring about the consolidation of the left wing development of the LP. However, if the right wing proves victorious, and so ends the prospect of the socialist transformation of the LP, the Marxists should not leave in an unorganised manner. Instead we should collectively decide how to proceed, and decide whether organisation outside of the LP has become more principled. But it is to be hoped that this possibility does not happen. The most advantageous prospect for socialist politics is that the left wing gains within the LP can be consolidated and result in the democratic socialist transformation of this organisation. This development will create the most favourable situation for the working class of the UK to become receptive to the idea of socialism. Many working class people have always considered the LP to be their party, but they have often been confused by its accommodation to neoliberal ideology, such as expressed by the development of New Labour. Marxists now have the opportunity to argue for socialism in terms of the recent developments within the LP. We should not squander this opportunity in the name of dogma. Instead we should argue that the progress of left-wing ideas within the LP, which have been promoted by the election of a left-wing leader, can become the basis to make the aims of genuine socialism popular within the Constituencies and the trade unions. Working people will become more receptive to the ideas of socialism because they will be advocated by their local LP. This does not mean Marxist groups cannot make effective propaganda for socialism, but people are more likely to listen to the arguments of the LP. In this context, Marxism can act to make the arguments for socialism of the local LP more effective and accessible. It is possible that we can develop a genuine synthesis between the role of Marxist theory and the activity of the radicalised local activist.

WHAT ABOUT THE REFORMIST LEGACY OF THE LABOUR PARTY?

Some people would object to the optimism of the above arguments. They would argue that the LP has historically been an instrument for the reform of capitalism and has opposed the aim of the socialist transformation of society. The most radical Labour government of 1945 only led to some selective nationalisations, and the creation of the welfare state and the NHS. Furthermore, in the recent period, the LP has effectively become New Labour, and this has meant the adaptation to neoliberal ideology and an emphasis on the importance of the market and the open rejection of any suggestion of support for socialism. Many of the LP MP’s still support the ideology of New Labour and reject as unrealistic the ideas of Jeremy Corbyn. It is true that the LP has historically been a reformist party that has had no intention of overthrowing capitalism, and it is also true that it has become more right-wing with the development of New Labour. Furthermore, in the recent period Labour councils have tamely implemented Conservative expenditure cuts, and many local branches have become inactive. Thus the present LP is not yet receptive to the message of campaigning and nor is it receptive to new ideas such as the role of mass activity and the credibility of socialism. This means it will take a protracted period of ideological struggle in order to make the LP more enthusiastic about left wing ideas, and the election of a radical leader will not immediately alter the general situation of inertia. But the influx of new members will begin to change the situation, they will be less impressed about the reformist legacy of the LP and instead they will be more receptive to the discussion of genuinely left wing ideas about the environment, nuclear disarmament, and proportional representation. Increasingly this development of revitalised branches will result in pressure to become more involved in local communities and to turn outwards to support campaigns about the situation of the disabled and the condition of mental health services. Jeremy Corbyn is likely to support this process, and he will support the transformation of local branches into militant campaigning forces.

It could be argued that none of this activism will automatically and immediately become translated into support for the aim of socialism. This is true, and it is why the role of Marxists within the LP becomes crucial. It is an important task of the Marxists to indicate the relationship between various campaigns and struggles and the goal of socialism. We can provide arguments that indicate why the particular cause will be most effectively realised when the struggle to transform society in a conscious manner begins in earnest. Hence it is our duty to suggest that it is the role of the LP to link all the different campaigns with the perspective of democratic socialism. Obviously, the right wing MP’s will oppose this standpoint, and instead argue in favour of a realistic LP that recognises the supposed limits on what can be done, and therefore they will suggest that it is necessary to restrict change to what is acceptable to the present system. It is necessary to reject this argument. The left wing of the LP will have to contend that the LP is not inherently reformist and therefore it can promote the more ambitious transformation of society. It is possible that the left wing of the LP could be defeated in this ideological struggle, but this conflict is unavoidable if the prospect of the democratic socialist transformation of the LP is to occur. The point is that the character of the LP is not defined by its past, and nor is the possibility of continued radicalisation inevitable. Instead the future of the LP, and its related politics, will be defined by the balance of forces. The left wing has to begin the struggle that brings about the conditions for the transformation of the LP into an organisation that supports democratic socialism. It will be the new activists who can be the most valuable ally in this process of radicalisation. We can act together in order to change the character of the LP, and so transform it into an agency for authentic socialism.

The point is that tradition and inertia can be overcome. It is true that the LP is presently defined by its past, including its recent past as New Labour. But this situation does not mean that change is impossible. The very crisis of capitalism, and the austerity policies of the Conservatives, has generated a yearning for change. This discontent has been expressed in the leadership contest of the LP. We can build on this incredible result in order to transform the character of the LP. Our strength is that people are dissatisfied with the traditional politics of the LP. The strength of the right wing of the LP is the influence of bourgeois ideology. They belong in the past, but our politics are the hope for a better future. We can promote this hope and generate a coherent vision of a better society. In contrast, the right wing of the LP are masters of cynicism but lack any sense of imagination. We can exploit their weakness in order to create a party that truly creates a spirit for change.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)James Marshall: Don’t Go Back: go forward, in Weekly Worker, 1072 September 3rd 2015 p9-11