THE ARGUMENTS FOR THE GENERAL STRIKE BY PHIL SHARPE (Democratic Socialist Alliance)

There are periods in the class struggle that demand the application of strategic imagination. The period before the First World War could be understood in this manner. It was increasingly apparent that the situation was defined by international tension and the threat of war. The Second International needed to develop a strategy that could represent opposition to war and which could inspire the working class to struggle for peace. However in the name of Marxist orthodoxy the German Social Democrats opposed the attempt to support the perspective of the general strike. They considered that this demand represented a Syndicalist deviation, but they were reluctant to support any tactical alternative.(1) Hence when war occurred the Second International was unprepared and quickly capitulated to the pressures of national chauvinism. It would be a tragedy if this lack of concern with the tactics of the class struggle was to be repeated in the present period.

The call for the general strike could have inspired a militant minority of the working class to oppose the First World War. We would argue that the call for a European general strike in the present situation of crisis and austerity has similar implications. The forces of Marxism are much smaller and less influential when compared to the situation before the First World War. But this adverse situation is no excuse for pessimism, scepticism and indifference about the significance of strategy. Instead we would suggest that despite its apparent marginalisation Marxism has an important role as the theoreticians of strategy. One of the reasons that the working class has not effectively mobilised against the austerity measures being implemented within the European Union is because of the lack of leadership of the trade unions and the isolation of Marxism. The forces of Marxism cannot overcome their isolation quickly and inevitability but we can argue for a strategy that would enable the working class to develop struggle against the austerity measures. We believe that the working class is increasingly angry about the present situation but what is lacking in order to realise the potential of this anger is the problem of strategy. In other words what is necessary in order to develop effective mass struggle against the austerity measures?

Working people have been ready to oppose the development of austerity in terms of national action in countries like Greece, Spain, Italy and the UK. However these limited actions have ultimately been ineffective and led to demoralisation. What is required is a higher level of struggle that would address the issue of European austerity. This is why the call for a European general strike is necessary. The present national limitations of working class consciousness and practice would be challenged and instead working people would be engaged in international class struggle that represented the possibility of success in terms of ending the implementation of austerity measures and enhancing the prospect of movement towards the revolutionary transformation of society and the formation of what would be an international workers government. In contrast all other types of nationally based and defensive activity have ended in defeat, and the attempt to put pressure on bourgeois governments to adopt policies of expansion are unrealistic in this period of crisis. Instead the most militant and intransigent approach is the only strategy that will promote a change in the balance of class forces and generate the potential for the working class to influence the economic and political situation. The alternative is the acceptance of retreat and the implementation of the austerity measures. This is the standpoint of the Labour Party and should be rejected by all principled socialists and trade unionists.

 Many Marxists argue that what is being proposed is unrealistic and not practical. However the alternative that tends to be advocated is based on a national approach and the perspective of the formation of a workers government in a particular country. In this context international direct action is called for in order to support the formation of the national workers government.(2) The problem with this approach is that it glosses over the issue of the potential national isolation of the particular country and the limitations of the siege economy. The prospects of socialism in one country are not very promising in the situation of an economically and politically integrated European Union. Instead what is required is the development of a strategy that could transform power relations within the European Union. This strategy is expressed by the European general strike which is effectively the development of international class struggle in order to realise particular objectives. The primary objectives of this action would be the replacement of the austerity measures by the policy of the development of an economy based on the realisation of need. Success of the general strike would generate the conditions of this prospect and create a favourable balance of class forces that advances the process of change. In contrast some Marxists call for the formation of a workers government but do not suggest how this is to be realised.(3) In contrast the general strike is the prelude to change, or the creation of the conditions for the transformation of society.

At the level of strategy it would not necessarily be advisable to advocate a general strike in all situations. The general strike has become the primary strategic question because economic issues have become the most important in political terms. The central political issue concerns whether society requires the austerity measures as the policy that will resolve the crisis. There is anger within the working class because the austerity programme seems to represent the burdens of the crisis being put onto the shoulders of the poor. The aim of the ruling class is to dismantle the welfare state in order to resolve the crisis at the expense of working people. This situation is similar in all of the countries of the European Union. Hence the merging of the importance of the economic and political demands the advocacy of a strategy that represents the ability to express this relationship. The election of reformist parties would not be this alternative because reformist politicians are committed to the continuation of the austerity measures. Nor is the formation of national workers governments the answer because this would not resolve the problem of the European character of the austerity programme. Instead we require something that has an economic dimension and is internationalist. In this context the success of the European general strike would pose the prospect of an alternative to austerity and this strike would be based on the role of organised social power that could become the basis of the society of the future. Crisis would be resolved by the success of the class struggle.

However it is necessary to address the various objections to the perspective of the general strike. Firstly, is it unrealistic for small groups of Marxists to advocate an ambitious strategy that lacks popular support? Would it not be more feasible to concentrate upon national approaches concerning the development of the class struggle? It would be unrealistic to assume that we can start with a simultaneous internationalist impulse that was favourable to the development of a European general strike. Instead it is most likely that national based class struggle will develop, and has to some extent already occurred. But it is the crucial task of Marxists to suggest that national struggle is unlikely to succeed because of the European context of the austerity measures. Instead we require a European tactic that would provide an alternative to the policies of the European Union. Hence the influence of nationalism is detrimental to the prospect of the development of international class struggle. However we have to support all national based forms of the class struggle and argue that they should become part of European activity that culminates in a general strike.

Is it realistic to assume that the isolated forces of Marxists can influence the class struggle? The answer to this question is that it is entirely possible that Marxism will be unable to influence the class struggle because of its marginalisation. But the very ability of Marxism to express strategic vision will be expressed by the difficulties involved if working people reject the perspective of the general strike. The problem of retreat has already occurred because of the national based and defensive character of struggle. The situation demands the adoption of the international general strike if progress is to be made in the class struggle. In this context the unity of Marxists around the call for a European general strike can start to acquire influence despite the relative isolation of Marxism. However if virtually all Marxists refuse to call for an international general strike we will never know how effective this perspective could have been. Only if Marxists are convinced by this demand and are determined to advocate it will the question of its importance become practical. At present there is little support for a European general strike because few Marxists are in favour of this standpoint.

Secondly, it is feasible that an alternative strategy could be superior to that of the general strike? If someone was to suggest a strategy that was superior to that of the European general strike it would be necessary to support it. But, at present nobody has outlined this potentially superior strategy. The call for the formation of the workers government is limited by the fact that it represents an ultimate aim of the revolutionary approach. The point is that what is required is a means or method by which this end can be realised. In the conditions of European wide crisis and austerity the means to the end are expressed by the general strike and the success of this approach can bring about the prospects for the formation of the workers government. Furthermore the arbitrary call for revolution would be abstract and formal and not connected to the present consciousness of working people. Instead there has been the development of various strikes and struggles against austerity throughout Europe. Hence it is possible and feasible to call for the generalisation of these struggles into the development of European action. In contrast it is questionable whether people are prepared at the moment to support the formation of workers governments. The strategic importance of the general strike is that its success would then become a prelude to the formation of the workers government. Advances in the struggle would enhance the possibility to generate the consciousness and practice for the development of an alternative society. But to make the workers government the effective ultimatum of the present struggles is to raise a demand that seems to have little relevance and practical importance.

Thirdly, it is the view of some Marxists that the central concern should be to build the party in an unfavourable period.(4) It could be argued that the task of party building is always important because the creation of a cadre organisation should have a constructive relation to the class struggle. But this standpoint does not represent a strategy for the class struggle and is instead a substitute in place of the role of strategy. Regardless of the size of the various Marxist organisations we have a duty and responsibility to develop a strategy for the advancement of class struggle against capitalism. Presently the situation is characterised by economic crisis and the austerity measures of the ruling class. We have argued that it is possible to make considerable progress in the development of a working class response to this situation by advocating the European general strike. In contrast those Marxists that prefer to emphasise the task of party building are differentiating the role of the party from that of the class struggle. Instead we should seek to build the party in relation to the advocacy of a strategy that can advance the prospects of the class struggle. If we effectively neglect this task of the elaboration of strategy we effectively repeat the passivity and determinism of German Social Democracy in the period before the onset of the First World War.

Fourthly, some Marxists would argue that the justification of a general strike outlined above represent a syndicalist deviation. Hence the importance of the general strike contrasts with the underestimation of the necessity of revolution. This argument only has credibility if the general strike is being conceived as an alternative to revolution. However the general strike is being posed in terms of how the international class struggle could be concretely advanced under the present circumstances. Only the prospect of the success of the general strike would create the possibility and necessity of revolutionary insurrection. It is also important to emphasise that we believe that whilst many people have some idea of what is meant by a general strike fewer would understand what is meant by revolution because of the mystification of Stalinism. Thus the success of the general strike would indicate that revolution represents the self-activity of the working class. Only the advance of the general strike would generate the prospect of revolution, but the general strike would not be identical to the revolution. This viewpoint would be an error and result in strategic limitations that undermine the transformation of the social relations and creation of socialism.

Fifthly, it is argued that the recent Arab Spring has indicated the necessity of an armed uprising. It is important to recognise that armed uprising has not necessarily been successful in realising its political objectives because of the problems of consciousness and lack of working class leadership of the insurrectionary process. The general aim of the Arab Uprisings has been the attainment of democracy. This has been a difficult objective to realise because of the continued influence of reactionary forces and the limitations of the mass movement. It is also important to understand that the situation is different in Europe and is characterised by the importance of the economic crisis and austerity. Hence it is important to construct an appropriate strategy that is based on these different circumstances. Ultimately the success of the general strike will indicate the relevance of revolutionary objectives. What this means in terms of the organisational character of the insurrection cannot be determined in advance.

Sixth, it could be argued that the trade unions are still weak and incapable of developing action that is of an offensive character. This viewpoint has some truth and it could be argued that the unions have not overcome the legacy of past defeats. But the mood is changing.(5) It is the very reactionary nature of the austerity measures that is generating support for struggles and strikes. In this context the cautious attitude of the Union leaders is not the same as mood within the rank and file. Many union members are prepared for action and are just waiting for the leadership to start the process of developing industrial action. However what is important is the type of action that will be called. Partial and limited actions will not be effective and even the prospect of national general strikes will not be sufficient. This is because of the international character of the austerity measures. Instead what is required is an indefinite European general strike that aims to end the policy of austerity. Gestures short of this type of action will not be sufficient. The anger of the working class means that this type of activity is not necessarily impractical and unrealistic. What is increasingly crucial is whether Marxism will be prepared to argue for what seems to be a very ambitious and audacious strategy. However the alternative is to argue in favour of propaganda for Communism. In utopian terms this would indicate the possible relation between the present and future, but it would not express how this future could be realised. In contrast the general strike represents the strategy that could advance the prospect of communism under the present conditions. The tendency to support the general strike is developing within the working class of Europe, but what is not present are people with the strategic imagination to develop the arguments in favour of the intensification of the international class struggle.

Seventh, sceptics would object to the general strike strategy because it expresses an underestimation of the nationalist consciousness of the working class. The argument is that international general strike has never occurred because of the nationalist influences within the working class. It is certainly true that the strategy of the international working class cannot be advocated in all circumstances, and political developments tend to assume national forms. But the international general strike became the principled expression of opposition to the outbreak of the First World War, and if it had been supported by the Second International the development of history could have acquired different forms. In the present context the unified action of the European ruling class in supporting austerity measures suggests the necessity and possibility of an international response by the working class of Europe. The most appropriate action under these circumstances would be the general strike. If this prospect was realised the class struggle could acquire international dimensions and overcome national limitations. It is the very policy of the European ruling class that promotes the potential for international class struggle.

In other words we are suggesting that the very conditions of the class struggle are creating the possibility to make internationalism a concrete reality and to overcome its present condition as a noble moral aim. Internationalism is presently a noble aim without practical impulses because it represents the doctrine of Marxism and has little popular influence outside of these circles. But the fact that austerity is an international policy implies the possibility of an international response from the working class. The general strike expresses the strategic content of the character of internationalism from below. Hence internationalism can be transformed from the abstract realms of socialist theory and instead become part of material class practice. In contrast, the alternative would be retreat because of national fragmentation. This development has already become apparent within the Greek situation. In order to overcome this problem of the national impasse of the struggle in Greece we should call for the extension of the struggle in terms of international dimensions. The most likely form of this international extension of the struggle would be the onset of the general strike.

Marxism is reluctant to advocate the demand of the European general strike because it is aware of its own limitations. Modesty because of marginalisation means that the politics of Marxism becomes adapted to what is considered to be realistic.(6) The result is a strategic vacuum and the tendency to become pessimistic. Hence the crisis of the Marxist intelligentsia has influenced the trajectory of the Marxist groups. Marxism is reduced to a dogma that few seem to think can become the practice of the class struggle. The response to this development is not to retreat into a comfortable orthodoxy but instead to develop the process of dialogue with working people. Increasingly the working class is angry but does not support an alternative. People know that the situation of austerity is unacceptable and yet are unable to support an alternative to the process of trying to create balanced budgets. Marxism should be able to advocate alternatives because of the wisdom of its strategic imagination. An aim of Marxist theory should be to enhance the prospect of realising the alternative future within the present. The limitations of the present should be challenged by the historical confidence that a different future is possible. This does not meant that the difficulties of the present should be ignored by a dogmatic perspective that glosses over the importance of contradictions. But the alternative of a passivity based on the pessimistic adaptation to the domination of what is should also be avoided. Instead we should attempt to connect the potential of the present with the prospects of a better future. The role of the general strike provides the mediations of this process under the present conditions. If a better form of mediation was to arise it would be necessary to advocate its importance and to reject the role of the general strike.

In other words the general strike is advocated because it is the most effective method of struggle under the present conditions. The importance of the general strike relates to the economic situation and what should be the response of the working class. It does not represent a magic formula or panacea that is appropriate under all circumstances. Instead the issue of the most effective strategy should be based on the character of the economic and political situation and how advance can be made in a manner that represents progress of the class struggle. In different circumstances the general strike could represent a problem in relation to the tasks of revolution and the overthrow of capitalism. But at the present situation the general strike acquires a potential or a massive leap in the consciousness and activity of the working class. The defeatism of the present could be overcome by generating support for the perspective of the general strike.

Some Marxists would argue that the general strike represents a dogma based on a mythical conception.(7) It is true that Sorel considered the general strike in terms of its mythical inspiration and capacity to motivate the working class to engage in struggle. The problem with this approach is that it tends to justify irrationalism and an absolutist view that ignores the importance of other forms of the class struggle. In contrast we would suggest that the importance of the general strike cannot be abstracted from concrete conditions of the class struggle and it should be discarded if the situation indicates the importance of other methods of struggle. However Marxists should not be reluctant to utilise the motivational impulses of the general strike and indicate how its successful application can transform the balance of class forces in favour of the working class. In this context we would argue that the general strike could end the austerity measures and prepare the basis for a better society and a different future. The general strike is not the revolution but it is the possible prelude to revolution. It represents a more progressive form of struggle and approach than the call to form a national workers government. In the situation of the globalisation of world capitalism all national perspectives are reactionary and should be replaced by international strategies of class struggle. The general strike is inherently internationalist and the answer to the austerity measures of the European ruling class. Success of the European general strike will prepare the basis for European revolution and the establishment of the European Socialist federation. This development could then become the beginning of the world revolution.

If we reject the standpoint of the general strike we will effectively be without a strategy for opposing the austerity measures of the European ruling class. This situation could then become the basis of devastating defeats. There is no automatic guarantee of success with the perspective of the general strike because there is no inevitable certainty of progress within history. But without the standpoint of the general strike the prospect of defeat is more likely. Marxists have a duty to advocate the strategy that can best advance the interests of the working class in the given situation. This is why the forces of Anti-Capitalism should support the role of the general strike as the alternative to European austerity.

FOOTNOTES

(1)Despite the vacillations within the syndicalists about the First World War they tended to be more principled than the Second International: Ralph Darlington ‘Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism’ Ashgate, Aldershot 2008 p136-143

Also: William Z Foster ‘Syndicalism’ Charles Kerr Chicago 1990 p29

(2)Keith Harvey ‘Greece and the Eurozone’ In Permanent Revolution Issue 23 Summer 2012 p21-26

(3)League for the Fifth International ‘The Greek Revolution and the tasks of the working class’ 2012

(4)This is the view of a leaflet produced by the SWP for their recent 2012 summer school entitled ‘Join the SWP’

(5)Mark Hoskisson ‘Can We Break Cameron’ In Permanent revolution issue 23 p12-20

(6)The moderate interpretation of Marxism is outlined by Richard Price in the article Judgement on Austerity in Permanent Revolution issue 23 p27-31

(7)F.F Ridley ‘Revolutionary Syndicalism in France’ Cambridge University Press 1970 p156-164