THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF LENIN'S 'LEFT WING COMMUNISM, AN INFANTILE DISORDER'

Lenin wrote his 'Left-Wing Communism an Infantile Disorder' in order to provide advice to the international communist movement in relation to the strategy and tactics of the struggle for proletarian revolution.(1) This work has been neglected in the recent period, and so it is a timely exercise to rediscover its importance for the class struggle. However, we should not be reticent to also outline how aspects of this work have become anachronistic because of changing events. The most obvious thing to recognise is that the political situation is no longer characterised by the victory of any single workers state. The capitalist system is victorious in global terms, and so the perspective that advice can be given by a leader of a successful revolution has become out-dated by events. Instead we are faced with the issue that is more important than those elaborated in 'Left-Wing Communism' which concern whether the contemporary working class has the required collective power that is able to sustain a viable struggle for the overthrow of capitalism. In contrast, Lenin was writing at a time when the success of the Russian revolution had led to the interest of the international working class in the principles and aims of the socialist transformation of society. Hence his major task was to preach caution and wisdom concerning the exercise of the class struggle. The very possibility of the victory of the working class was not in doubt. But the present situation raises many questions about the prospects for the success of the aim of socialism. This present situation has led to many theoretical questions being raised about whether the contemporary working class can acquire the consciousness and ability to overthrow capitalism. But in the time of Lenin, he was preoccupied with ultra-left illusions that could undermine the prospects of the victory of the class struggle. But the very success of the class struggle was not in doubt. Lenin was concerned with various strategical limitations of the Communist parties that could undermine its ability to intervene in the class struggle. Hence the marginalisation of Marxism was not an issue, and instead what was of more concern was the problem of dogmatism and adventurist conceptions of the class struggle that could result in the undermining of the influence of the various communist parties. The actual historical mission of party and class was not an important issue.

Consequently it is not surprising that Lenin's starting point is the success of the realisation of the dictatorship of the proletariat on the basis of utilising the strictest centralisation and application of discipline. (2) We would argue that the very Soviet experience has generated questions about the validity of the dictatorship of the proletariat because of the problems caused by the connection between dictatorship and the role of terror and violence. In other words the Soviet model of 1917 is not something to be emulated, and so the claim that the Russian revolution is an example to be copied is no longer convincing. Instead we would suggest that the conception of successful socialism is based on avoiding the limitations of the Soviet model. Lenin's praise of the leadership of the Bolshevik party is also something to be questioned. We know that this approach meant the working class was never able to exercise satisfactory economic and political power, and instead the party ruled over the class. The leading role of the Bolshevik party meant that the dictatorship of the proletariat was always a problematical and questionable conception and instead the system was not based on a popular mandate and accountability to the workers and peasants. The historical justification of the Bolsheviks was that they were more principled than their opponents in the Second International concerning the struggle for proletarian power in Russia and international revolution. The Bolsheviks in theory and practice proclaimed the aim of: 'All Power to the Soviets', and elaborated how this demand was connected to the development of the possibility of genuine socialism. (3)

Lenin outlines how the development of the Bolshevik party was based on rejection of the illusions of ultra-leftism, or justification of the approach that intransigence could replace the importance of tactics and the necessity of retreats and compromises. This point can be related to the example of the Brest Litovsk treaty when it was necessary to achieve peace with German imperialism and reject the adventurist tactic of revolutionary war. This compromise did not mean that the Soviet leadership had rejected the aim of world revolution, rather it was recognised that it was not possible under the given balance of class forces, and the war weariness of the population, to engage Germany in military confrontation. Lenin defined this type of compromise in the following manner: “The conclusion is clear: to reject compromises “on principle”, to reject the admissibility of compromise in general, no matter of what kind, is childishness, which it is difficult even to take seriously. A political leader who desires to be useful to the revolutionary proletariat must know how to single out concrete cases when such compromises are inadmissible, when they are an expression of opportunism and treachery, and direct all the force of criticism, the full edge of merciless exposure and relentless war, against those concrete compromises, and not allow the past masters of “practical socialism” and Parliamentary Jesuits to dodge and wriggle out of responsibility by disquisitions on 'compromises in general.'“(4)

In relation to connecting this understanding to the tasks of the Marxist Left of today, we would accept that the situation is not favourable to the development of the cause of socialism and so we have to try and establish some type of tactic that would advance the realisation of this aim without leading to the undermining of our principles and strategy. In this context we could argue that it is possible to recognise that the election of a left-wing leader of the Labour Party has led to the generation of a certain level of radicalisation. We can relate to this mood without diluting our socialist principles, but we should also be aware of the limitations posed by the election of a left -wing leader of a right-wing party. However, our policy is also based on the understanding that it is not yet possible to promote a revolutionary offensive, and instead the most that can be gained in the present circumstances is the election of a reformist left-wing government. We recognise that this tactic represents the dilution of our revolutionary objectives and communist principles, but we do not consider that this compromise represents an accommodation with the forces of opportunism. Instead this process of tactical flexibility is related to a recognition that the class struggle has not been favourable to Marxism in the last thirty years, and so the promotion of imaginative tactics could result in the overcoming of our present marginalisation. However, it would be an unacceptable compromise if this new stance led to the acceptance of the programme of left reformism. Instead our support for left reformism should be based on the continued advocacy of the approach of revolutionary politics. We should argue that the major aims of left wing reformism can only be realised by the development of a mass movement that is influenced by socialist principles. It would be an opportunist error to accept uncritically the political standpoint of Corbyn in relation to the construction of this united front. But we do call for the formation of this united front in order to promote the possibility to overcome the present isolation and marginalisation of Marxism.

In contrast a Marxism without compromise would reject the importance of the role of Parliamentary politics, and the forthcoming referendum on the EU, and instead deny the actuality of the isolation of Marxism in order to promote the standpoint of the revolutionary offensive. This approach ignores the present situation of the isolation of Marxism and the connected hegemony of the ideas of the ruling class. In order to overcome this situation adventurism cannot advance the progress of Marxism and instead can only discredit its legitimacy. The major form of this illusory politics is the viewpoint that at some imminent moment the prospects of the particular Marxist group will be transformed. The long-term character of the class struggle, and its unknown aspects, are effectively rejected. This view is expressed in terms of the illusory view that a No vote in the EU referendum would promote the development of the forces for socialism within the UK, and therefore not result in the advances of the forces of right-wing populism. What is not recognised is that Marxism is presently isolated within the UK, and so is not likely to quickly become relevant. Crucially, the adoption of opportunist tactics in the referendum will not enhance the influence of Marxism and instead will only promote the forces of national chauvinism. This is what Lenin meant by an unacceptable compromise that results in the undermining and dilution of the principles of Marxism. It is this prospect that is confronting the forces of Marxism in the UK because they do not recognise the difference between a principled and unprincipled compromise. Hence they do not recognise it is principled to advocate a united front with Corbyn, but conciliation of the forces of right-wing populism in the UK referendum on the EU is opportunist and does not advance the cause of socialism.

Lenin discusses something that is very important for the class struggle. He outlines the merits of the role of the revolutionary party for the class struggle, and rejects the standpoint that suggests it is possible to realise socialism without the role of a centralised party. He argues that a party is vital in order to both lead the struggle for socialism and to organise the forces for socialism against opposition in the immediate period of the aftermath of the creation of the dictatorship of the proletariat: “Without an iron party tempered in the struggle, without a party enjoying the confidence of all that is honest in the given class, without a party capable of watching and influencing the mood of the masses, it is impossible to conduct such a struggle successfully......Whoever weakens the iron discipline of the party of the proletariat..... actually aids the bourgeoisie against the proletariat.”(5) But is the question of discipline defined in terms of being for or against the role of the party? It would be more perceptive to consider this question in terms of the relationship of the party to the class. Hence does the party impose itself on the activity of the class, or does it instead act to promote the ability of the class to act as an independent force? This question has never been satisfactorily tackled by the Marxist Left in the UK, and the result has been the creation of a collection of repressive democratic centralist regimes. What we do know is that the formation of these bureaucratic regimes, as a caricature of the Communist International, has not been able to promote the development of the class struggle. They have instead promoted their own interests as being more important than the generation of the consciousness of the working class. The point is the promotion of the Leninist party has not inspired class struggle in the period of the offensive of capital against labour. What we need is a party that is able to relate to the concerns of the working class in a manner that encourages the development of struggle. This inspiration for this would be Martov's pamphlet: 'On Agitation''.(6) He outlines how the party would be concerned with the immediate issues that create unrest within the working class in order to connect this discontent with the struggle for socialism.

The point being made is that the recent period has indicated that the role of the Leninist party has been ineffective in relation to the task of generating the development of the class struggle. Instead the very conception of struggle has been questioned because of the structural changes within capitalism, and the validity of socialism has been undermined by the demise of Stalinism. In this context what seems to be important is not the restoration of the importance of the revolutionary party but instead the re-emergence of class struggle. The role of the party is not to lead the class, but instead to encourage the actual development and generation of class struggle. What we have learnt from recent history is that a passive and divided working class means that the prospect of revolutionary change is not likely to happen. The role of the party cannot autonomously promote the development of mass struggle. Instead the theoretical and practical role of the party should be to inspire the creation of mass movements against capital. What constitutes leadership will be decided by the outcome of the ability of the party to encourage the self-formation of a mass movement. This means the class will not respond to the leading role of the party, and instead the re-emergence of a militant working class will define the significance of the party. The strategic advice of the party will be vital, but what will determine the prospect of revolutionary change will be the ability of the working class to create Soviets, or potential rival forms of self-government. However, at present this situation is unlikely because the situation is dominated by the influence of bourgeois political economy. This means the role of the bourgeois parties is uncontested, and the working class is passive or influenced by reactionary currents. The importance of the Leninist party in this situation is marginal, and its ability to promote revolutionary class consciousness within the proletariat is questionable. What is crucial in this context is whether the spontaneous dynamism of the working class can challenge the domination of bourgeois ideology and so create organisational forms that undermine capital. The role of the party should be to encourage this process. In contrast, Lenin was writing at a time when the Third International was establishing mass credibility because of the Russian revolution. He could outline how the task was to establish the leadership of the party over the class in order to promote the development of the revolutionary process. But the situation has changed since that time. Leninism has no longer this credibility and authority. Instead what is crucial is the re-emergence of the militant authority of the working class.

Lenin also opposes those who would reject the importance of the existing trade unions and instead would form new revolutionary trade unions. In general terms this approach can be supported because Lenin is not indifferent to the necessity of struggle against the leadership of the unions by the representatives of the labour aristocracy and bureaucracy: “This struggle must be waged ruthlessly, and it unfailingly must be brought – as we brought it – to a point when all the incorrigible leaders of opportunism and social chauvinism are completely discredited and driven out of the trade unions.”(7) Lenin is right to suggest that Communists should be in the existing mass trade unions, but they should not accept the reactionary politics of these unions. Instead they should seek to challenge and overcome the reactionary leadership and aim to win the unions to revolutionary politics. This point can be indicated in relation to the present situation in which the trade union leaders refuse to propose action against the austerity policies of the government despite support within the unions for this policy. However, Lenin also calls for the revolutionary leadership of the Communists within the Unions as the alternative to the present situation of the dominant influence of the opportunists: “But we wage the struggle against the “labour aristocracy” in the name of the masses of the workers and in order to win them to our side; we wage the struggle against the opportunist and social chauvinist leaders in order to win the masses to our side.”(8) This approach, does not repudiate - but it is ambiguous - the necessity of rank and file control of the unions. We would reject this ambiguity and suggest that the aim is to promote rank and file domination within the unions as the most effective and principled basis to promote militant struggles against the offensive of capital against labour. The alternative of Communist leadership does not necessarily imply that the rank and file have adequate control over the actions of the unions. However, we have every confidence that rank and file control would promote opposition to austerity. This very development would also promote the influence of Marxism within the Unions.

It was understandable that Lenin effectively called for Communist domination of the Unions in the period when the opposing forces seemed to be Social Democracy and Communism. But this situation is no longer present within the Unions and instead the central problem is the continued domination of the unions by an unrepresentative union bureaucracy. Hence the aim is to transform this situation by the generation of the influence of the rank and file. It is to be hoped that the forces of Marxism would be part of the struggle to increase rank and file control of the Unions. However the aim is not to create unions that are subordinated to any one party, even if that party is revolutionary. Instead it is to be hoped that the development of rank and file control of the unions will result in a flourishing of political views. However, the central task is to overcome the effective accommodation of the union bureaucracy to the austerity aims of the bourgeois government. The establishment of rank and file control of the unions will promote the formation of a mass movement of opposition to capitalism in general. This very development will mean the question of the general strike becomes a real and practical issue. The possibility of a general strike against austerity becomes credible. This very process could be undermined by Communist leadership of the Unions. Indeed such a situation could create a new division between the leadership role of the Communists and the rank and file. Instead we want the rank and file to be the leadership. Only in this situation will the trade unions be principally transformed in a democratic and effective manner. The crucial question is about participation and consultation and not political control. In contrast, in the time of Lenin it seemed that Communist control of the unions was the only way to realise the views of the rank and file. The historical experience of Communist leadership of Unions has indicated that effective control by the rank and file has not been realised. The question of participation in the Unions is not effectively resolved by the demise of the influence of the labour bureaucracy. Indeed the Communist party became a new form of bureaucracy. Hence the only principled answer is to create the structures that promote the rank and file control of the unions.

It could be argued that the development of rank and file control of the unions is identical to the creation of Communist domination. This is possible, but not likely under the present conditions. The marginalisation of Marxism would not be automatically overcome with the generation of rank and file control of the unions. Instead the most likely role of Communists is to promote the realisation of rank and file transformation of the unions. What is crucial is that the importance of the domination of the unions by the labour bureaucracy is ended, and instead replaced by a process of democratic participation and consultation of the membership. Only in this manner will it be possible to create unions that respond to the wishes of the membership, and so are prepared to carry out militant actions against the dictates of capital and the government. In this manner the Unions begin to adopt something similar to a communist programme without being dominated by communists. Hence the Unions become influenced by the strategy and tactics of Marxism but are not under the direct leadership of Communists.

Lenin rejected the views of those German communists who rejected the importance of Parliament in the following manner: “Parliamentarianism, of course is “politically obsolete” for the Communists in Germany; but – and that is the whole point – we must not regard what is obsolete for us as being obsolete for the class, as being obsolete for the masses. Here again we find that the “Lefts” do not know how to reason, do not know how to act as the party of the class, or the masses. You must not sink to the level of the masses, to the level of the backward strata of the class. That is incontestable. You must tell them the bitter truth. You must call their bourgeois democratic and parliamentary prejudices – prejudices. But at the same time you must soberly follow the actual state of class consciousness and preparedness of the whole class (not only of its Communist vanguard), of all the toiling masses, (not only of their advanced elements.)”(9) This is a definition of revolutionary leadership. Marxists should understand what is important to the working class without necessarily accommodating to the influence of bourgeois views that have motivated this viewpoint. In this context it is possible to recognise the importance of Parliament without rejecting the emphasis on the role of Soviets as an expression of genuine democratic self-government of the working class. The party should try to understand the influence of bourgeois ideology within the working class in order to oppose this influence and to provide an alternative. However, it is not sufficient to merely denounce the role of bourgeois ideology, and to therefore abstain from involvement in ideological struggle to overcome its influence. Instead we should outline why we understand the reasons for working class people supporting capitalism and bourgeois democracy and so reject the revolutionary alternative. Only in this comprehensive manner can we outline the alternative reasons why the standpoint of Marxism is more principled, practical, and corresponds to the interests of the working class.

These theoretical tasks have never been carried out satisfactorily by Marxists in capitalist countries. Instead there has been a one-sided appeal to a mythical working class that is assumed to have semi-revolutionary consciousness. The effective influence of bourgeois democratic ideology is not recognised and opposed. Instead it becomes a mystery why this supposedly semi-revolutionary proletariat does not respond to the appeals of the Marxist party, and the result is that the party is dominated by an internal world that does not explain the actual consciousness of the working class. This situation has been complicated by the fact that the contemporary working class is dominated by the influence of bourgeois political economy that the party seems unable to explain. Hence Marxists are unable to understand why the appeal to develop action against austerity is not supported in more receptive terms. The inability to understand the consciousness of the working class within contemporary reality means that the appeal of Conservatism is not recognised, and instead it is assumed that an ever militant working class is prepared for action. The fact that such action does not occur is not explained. In other words the significance of bourgeois democratic ideology within the working class is not recognised, and so arguments that explain its durability are not developed. Instead a false optimism is outlined in terms of a conception of the class struggle that does not exist outside the inner world of Marxism. The point is that Marxists have effectively given up on the attempt to understand the working class as it is, as opposed to a conception based on ideological bias. This means objective reality is understood in terms of what we would like it to be and not in terms of its difficulties and challenges. Hence the fact that the balance of class forces is in favour of capital and against labour is ignored, and instead society is presented as being receptive for militant action. Hence, the actual undermining of militant activity because of the influence of bourgeois democratic ideology is ignored. For example it is assumed that the Labour Party will win the next election. This ignores the influence of propaganda against Corbyn and his supposed extremism. What is also ignored is the level of demoralisation within the working class which means that people are receptive to right wing ideas and influences. Consequently, we have to have a starting point concerning where we think people are, as opposed to what we would like them to be, which results in propagating illusions about receptiveness to Marxist ideas.

Lenin argues that if people are still convinced by the importance of Parliament, Marxists should participate in elections. This tactic represents one instance in which Marxists seem to have accepted his instructions. But what we need to recognise is the importance of the election of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party. The election victory of this left reformist leadership of the Labour Party could seriously de-stabilise capitalism, and awaken the working class to struggle against capitalism. The expectations of people could be raised, and the confidence that change can be possible would be increased. In this context Lenin is right to suggest that it is wrong to prioritise the Soviets over the role of bourgeois Parliaments. It was necessary to go through the experience of a Constituent Assembly in order to understand the superiority of Soviets. Hence it will also be necessary for the working class to go through the experience of a left reformist government in order to recognise the superiority of a revolutionary alternative. The limitations of left reformism will indicate the credentials of the alternative of the self-rule of the working class. But without this experience of left reformist administration the influence of bourgeois ideology will remain strong and the working class will remain demoralised. In contrast, the very failures of Corbyn's government will promote the influence of an alternative. On the one hand experience of the Corbyn administration will indicate that a principled alternative is possible, and that this prospect cannot be realised by the methods of Parliament. On the other hand the influence of Soviet democracy will become more popular. It will be understood that the only manner in which the limitations of reforms and bourgeois democracy can be challenged will be by the development of Soviet democracy. This is why the very experience of the Corbyn government is a potential invaluable lesson promoting the development of revolutionary class consciousness.

However, Lenin is no necessarily right to suggest that the Soviets are superior to the role of a Constituent Assembly. In relation to Corbyn the experience of the limitations of a left reformist government may indicate the necessity of the formation of Soviets. But this development does not necessarily imply the demise of Parliament. The historical limitations of Soviets may make people reluctant to call for the abolition of Parliament. Instead the very formation of Soviets could become the basis to establish a popular basis for the creation of a revolutionary government within Parliament. The revolutionary application of universal suffrage would mean that a workers government could be realised on the basis of the combination of the exercise of bourgeois democracy together with the proletarian democracy related to the formation of Soviets. In that sense the dictatorship of the proletariat would be a genuine democratic republic, as envisaged by Marx. This development would overcome the undemocratic limitations of the transformation of the Soviets into one party rule, which occurred in the Bolshevik regime. But for this development to occur, the radicalising effect of the Corbyn government would have to be generated. For this situation to occur, the election of the Corbyn administration would have to be a priority. This is not to suggest that revolutionary developments could not occur in a different manner. But for these possibilities to occur a tremendous leap in consciousness would have to be promoted. Hence it is more likely that the expectations raised by a Corbyn government will bring about the radicalisation of the working class. In contrast, the Russian working class created Soviets as the expression of the revolutionary alternative because they already had a high level of class consciousness. A similar situation is not apparent in the UK, and this is why any possible radicalisation will require the prior emergence of a left wing Labour government. The very electoral victory of this type of government, given the influence of bourgeois ideology, will be an immense achievement.

It could be argued that this type of strategy represents a dilution of revolutionary principles. But this perspective does not represent a rejection of a revolutionary approach because the formation of the left wing Labour government is considered to represent the possibility to overcome the present demoralisation within the working class, and to therefore raise expectations about what is possible. Hence the formation of a radical labour government could undermine the influence of bourgeois ideology and instead promote the view that measures can be taken that undermine capitalism and instead promote the interests of the working class. In other words an emphasis on the importance of this type of strategy is based on the recent history of the working class in the UK and an understanding of what could be required in order to overcome the ideological hegemony of bourgeois political economy. The possibility to develop class consciousness and militant activity means that in an indirect manner a revolutionary approach is being encouraged and cultivated. It has been argued that Corbyn is unpopular with the working class, but this is not a uniform view. He has the support of the Unions, and this development can be developed in order to bring about a famous electoral victory. This situation would then raise the level of expectations about the radical measures that a Labour government could introduce with the support of an emerging mass movement. In this manner the emergence of Soviet type organisations could result from the generation of the morale of the working class. This situation would mean that the working class would demand more measures and put pressure on the Corbyn government to become more radical. This situation would mean the process of change would become irreversible and unstoppable, or alternatively the government would undermine any more militant activity. Whatever happened, the working class would no longer be demoralised and would be increasingly able to impose its own demands onto society.

However it is possible that the experience of a left wing Labour government would only increase the demoralisation of the working class. This is a possibility, but we should not connect strategy to the worst possible scenario. Instead at the moment the election of a left wing Labour government would be the most appropriate basis to improve the class consciousness of the working class. The result of this situation could be radical developments which improve the possibilities for the socialist transformation of society. This perspective represents a compromise with the traditional development of revolutionary strategy based on the formation of soviets. But the raising of expectations created by a Labour government could intensify the class struggle. In this manner the orthodox features of a revolutionary strategy become relevant. However, it would be opportunist if we considered the election of a left wing Labour government as an adequate substitute for the necessity of revolutionary strategy. This standpoint is not being advocated. Instead only the creation of popular organisations of the working class can advance the possibility of revolutionary transformation. Such a development can be achieved in relation to the progress made in class consciousness by the election of a left wing Labour government. This situation would make the working class receptive to the possibility to create Soviets. If this possibility does not occur it is more likely that the left wing Labour government will fail, and result in a defeat for the working class.

Lenin had to contend with those left communists who rejected participation in bourgeois Parliaments because of their preference for the development of Soviets. He argued that it was not a question of making a choice but instead the two tasks were involved in developing the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. We can extend his point and suggest that it is not necessary to reject support for the role of a Left wing Labour government in relation to developing the possibility for the socialist transformation of society because the alternatives of soviets are superior and more principled. Instead we should argue that the formation of a left wing Labour government creates the most effective possibility for the generation of Soviets. Nor would we expect the development of Soviets to become the pretext to replace the role of Parliament. Instead it would be necessary to consider the process of transition to socialism in terms of the unification of the role of the Soviets and Parliament. This would mean the advantages of bourgeois democracy are not rejected in favour of socialist democracy. Instead what is being proposed is the unification of bourgeois and socialist democracy. This approach represents a principled compromise that recognises the people of the UK will not want to realise socialism in terms of the demise of bourgeois democracy. Such an understanding was not understood in the time of Lenin when the Soviets were considered as superior democratic instruments of the working class.

Lenin outlines how in the class struggle it is necessary to combine methods of intransigence with the role of compromise and the possibility of unification with more right wing, but mass organisations, such as the Independent Social Democrats in Germany. (10) This is a lesson that could have been recognised as valid by the many Marxist organisations in the UK and internationally. They have rejected the possibility of unification with centrist organisations because that policy has been considered to be unprincipled. They do not recognise that such a process of unity could raise the morale of the working class and create mass type organisations that are more able to intervene in the class struggle. Instead of the gains represented by unity the Marxist organisations have preferred to uphold ‘purity’ in the name of opposing opportunism. The result has often been the justification of sectarianism. However, in defence of these organisations it could be argued that they were merely carrying out the 21 conditions of the Communist International, which imposed strict conditions concerning the unification of revolutionary and centrist organisations. In contrast to Lenin's flexibility about admitting the Independents of Germany into the Communist Party and Communist International in ''Left Wing Communism'', the 21 conditions is apparently opposed to such prospects. They argue: “Every organization that wishes to affiliate to the Communist International must regularly and methodically remove reformists and centrists from every responsible post in the labour movement (Party organizations, editorial boards, trade unions, parliamentary factions, co-operatives, local government) and replace them with tested communists, without worrying unduly about the fact that, particularly at first, ordinary workers from the masses will be replaced 'experienced' opportunists.”(11) It is also argued in point 7 of the Conditions that “The parties that wish to belong to the Communist International have the obligation of recognizing the necessity of a complete break with reformism and 'centrist' politics and of spreading this break amongst the widest possible circles of their party members. Consistent Communist politics are impossible without this.”(12) Hence the 21 Conditions would seem to rule out any relations with the Independents led by Kautsky as being an opportunist error. The principled character of the Communist Parties has to be based on strict organizational and ideological uniformity. But Lenin in his ''Left Wing Communism' has outlined the flexibility needed to create revolutionary parties, and this will involve both alliances and unification with centrist forces. Indeed, the Bolsheviks were unified with the Mensheviks for a considerable period of time.

Lenin's flexible approach has proved to be historically vindicated, and the 21 conditions to be rigid, inflexible, and dogmatic. The unification between centrists and the revolutionary party was often historically possible. The Independent Labour Party often considered joining the Communist International, but was prevented by the 21 conditions. The unification of the ILP with the British Communist Party would have created a popular mass revolutionary party. It would have been able to intervened in the class struggle and provide an effective opposition to the Labour Party. But organisational inflexibility undermined this possibility. By the 1930's the ILP was increasingly mistrustful of the opportunism of the CPGB. The prospect of unification was undermined by the development of Stalinism. Application of flexible Leninism in the 1920's could have led to a mass revolutionary party in the UK.

Lenin repeats his view that it is ultra-left to consider that Soviets can be formed without participation in reactionary Parliaments: “The writer of this letter is perfectly clear in the point that only workers soviets and not Parliament can be the instrument whereby the aims of the proletariat will be achieved......But the writer of the letter does not even ask, it does not occur him to ask, whether it is possible to bring about the victory of the Soviets over Parliament without getting pro-Soviet politicians into Parliament, without disintegrating parliamentarianism from within, without working within Parliament for the success of the of the Soviets for their forthcoming task of dispersing Parliament.”(13) This standpoint has been outlined in relation to the issue of the election of a Corbyn government and the elaboration of the view that the role of a left wing government in Parliament could promote the emergence of Soviets. Hence it would be an expression of rigid thinking to contrast the importance of Parliament to that of Soviets in this instance. Instead it would be more perceptive to recognise how the experience of a Corbyn government could radicalise the working class. The result of this situation could be the formation of Soviets. Indeed it would be the task of the Marxist Left to make this connection and to call for the development of Soviets in order to strengthen and encourage the determination of the Corbyn government to act against capitalism.

However another comment by Lenin about the relationship of Communists to a Labour government should be treated with more caution: “On the contrary, from the fact that the majority of the British workers still follow the lead of the British Kerenskys or Scheidemanns and have not yet had the experience of a government composed of those people, which experience was required in Russia and Germany to secure the mass passage of workers to communism, it undoubtedly follows that the British Communists should participate in Parliamentary action, that they should, from within Parliament, help the masses to see the results of a Henderson and Snowden government in practice, that they should help the Hendersons and Snowdens to defeat the united forces of Lloyd George and Churchill. To act otherwise would mean placing difficulties in the way of the revolution: for revolution is impossible without a change of views in the majority of the working class, and this change is brought about the political experience of the masses and never by propaganda alone.”(14) This comment had validity at the time it was written because there had been no experience of the role of right wing Labour governments. But since that time we have had many experiences of mostly right wing Labour governments, and they have increasingly acted like Conservative administrations. Hence this comment is anachronistic, and people have some awareness of what a typical Labour government would be like. However, this comment is relevant when applied to a left wing Labour government. We have never had this type of administration in the history of the UK. Indeed it would be an achievement to elect this type of government given the hostile propaganda. In these circumstances it would be a political educational lesson for working people to have experience of a left wing administration. This is why we call for the election of a left wing Labour government. Such a development could result in radicalisation which promotes increasing militancy and the formation of a mass movement for social change. In this context aspects of the class struggle would have a role within Parliament. This activity would define whether it was possible for Soviets to emerge. In any eventuality the situation could become more favourable for class struggle against capital and so promote the cause of socialism.

In conclusion Lenin outlines an understanding of how to combine revolutionary principles with the necessity of compromise in organisational and strategic terms. This is the only manner in which flexibility can be combined with the importance of intransigence. In comparison the Ultra-Left's are willing to adopt an inflexible standpoint because they can only conceive of the possibility of realising revolutionary success in terms of the strict emulation of the experience in Russia of 1917. They do not recognise that experience constantly changes and so results in the necessity of a continual modification of the relationship of strategy and tactics and the importance of retreats and compromises. In this context there is a necessity of recognition of the importance of national differences and the connected importance of tactical adjustments. All of this has relevance for the present situation and the necessity to reject dogma in the development of the strategy and tactics of revolution. What is more antiquated is Lenin's assumption that the vanguard has been won for the purpose of proletarian revolution. We know that over the years the regressive ideological effects of Stalinism has meant that the relationship between the role of the vanguard and the perspective of proletarian revolution has been compromised. Instead we have to ask the basic question as to whether the contemporary working class is still capable of the collective action required for the transformation of society. Lenin's 'Left Wing Communism' had a confidence that was based on the recent success of revolution. We no longer have this level of historical assurance. Instead we are starting with virtually no traditions of militant struggle and the assertion of class political independence. But Lenin's work still represents lessons about how to build revolutionary parties in a flexible manner, and the necessity to avoid the rigidities and dogmas of an ultra-leftist approach.

(1)Vladimir Lenin: Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder, In Selected Works Volume 2 Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow 1951 p341-447

(2) ibid p344-347

(3) p341-342

(4) P359

(5) P367

(6)Yuri Martov: 'On Agitation' mentioned in Adam B Ulam The Bolsheviks, Harvard University Press, 1998 p119-121

(7)Lenin op cit p375

(8) P376

(9) ibid p382-383

(10) ibid p399-402

(11)Theses on the Conditions of Admission into the Communist International, In Theses, Resolutions and Manifestoes of the Communist International, Ink Links, London 1980 p93

(12) ibid p94

(13)Lenin op cit p407

(14) ibid p411