UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LABOUR PARTY LEADERSHP CONTEST BY PHIL SHARPE

The paper of the Communist Party of Britain supports Jeremy Corbyn in relation to the Labour Party leadership contest. (1) The article suggests that the candidature of Corbyn would attract popular support and become the basis to mobilise support for socialism within the LP: “Anybody who has been following the leadership hustings, from the Fabian society to the GMB union congress in Dublin, knows that Corbyn represents a real political trend within the Labour Party.”(2) It has been possible to get Corbyn onto the ballot for Labour leader because of the desire of some MP’s to have a broad contest. But this situation will not result in a dynamic political process that results in detailed discussion about the strategy and policy of the LP. This assumption that the leadership struggle will promote democracy in action is based on wishful thinking. The contemporary LP is not characterised by competition between rival factions, and the remnants of the left-wing do not have popular support. Instead the LP is defined by the influence of contemporary right-wing Social Democratic ideology, or Blairism, and in this context the regime of Ed Miliband has represented a brief left-wing interlude. This point has been indicated by the desire of the various right-wing candidates for the post of LP leader to establish their respectable Blairite credentials and to repudiate the legacy of both Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband. The assumption is that the LP lost the general election because it adopted a manifesto that effectively rejected the legacy of New Labour economic orthodoxy and ignored the concern of aspirational voters. Ed Miliband’s populist egalitarianism was considered to be radical and an accommodation to ‘Old Labour’.

In other words the New Labour character of the LP did not end with the resignation of Tony Blair as Prime Minister. Instead the influence of this form of right-wing Social Democracy has become deeply entrenched within the Parliamentary and Constituency sections of the LP. Ed Miliband was able to become LP leader with trade union support, and he believed it was possible to win the election with his confused programme of opposition to the privileges of the very wealthy and the assumption that renewed state intervention would be necessary to resolve the economic crisis. However he was unable to communicate his standpoint very effectively, and instead the voters preferred the Tory claim to be economically serious via the advocacy of a deflationary plan to overcome the effects of recession. Influential supporters of the LP interpreted the general election result as the outcome of the effective rejection by Miliband of New Labour respectability and moderation. The result of this mood is the resurgence of Blairism and the creation of an effective consensus that only the adoption of the politics and economics of New Labour will ensure future electoral victory. These assumptions are made on the basis of ignoring the significance of the results in Scotland where a resurgent nationalism was based on the message of anti-austerity.

It is important for us to understand that the rejuvenation of the politics of New Labour will mean that the opportunities to build a popular left wing within the LP are effectively non-existent. The influence of the Labour left has been declining since 1983 when the electorate emphatically rejected the socialist inclined manifesto of the LP: “The news that truly mattered in 1983, however, was that voters had rendered yet another negative verdict on what Labour had to offer. The effect would be to close another option, another pathway, for the beleaguered party of the people…….In 1983 the party offered something different – a definitively left wing programme promising a more interventionist alternative economic strategy, a massive redistribution of wealth, withdrawal from Europe, and a unilateralist non-nuclear defence strategy. This would involve a fundamental break with NATO and the United States. It produced the worst election result since 1931. The varieties of ‘Labourism’ seemed by 1983 to have been exhaustively explored, debated and dismissed by voters.”(3) One of the results of this situation was that the new generation of LP politicians began the process of examination of the politics of Labourism. The modernisation of the LP inaugurated by Neil Kinnock led to Policy Reviews that developed an ideological and political atmosphere that enabled the later creation of New Labour. The triumph of Tony Blair in becoming the political leader of the LP in 1994 was not an organisational conspiracy but was instead because New Labour was able to provide a philosophy, ideology, economics and policy measures that seemed to be the most compatible for a society that had been shaped by Thatcherism and the development of globalisation. In contrast the vision of the Left was still shaped by the 1970’s and images of heroic struggles against the Conservative government of the 1980’s. Primarily New Labour gained popular support because of its ideological message that it was not any variety of Old Labour: “The term ‘New Labour’ was used to demonstrate to a sceptical electorate that Labour policies would not be like the policies of the Wilson-Callaghan Governments in terms of the level of direct taxation and in terms of the tripartite approach to industrial relations. Furthermore, it was used to demonstrate that New Labour was a moderate Social Democratic party not an exceptionally left-wing party like the Labour Party was under the leadership of Michael Foot between 1980-83 when the Bennite ‘New left’ dominated. What New Labour was attempting and succeeding in achieving was to demonstrate that they were not the ‘Old right’ or the ‘Old left’ or the ‘New left’ of the Labour Party but an ideologically moderate and significantly reformed social democratic party.”(4) In these distinctive terms New Labour could be hegemonic within the LP because its strategy and ideology enabled it to be successful in elections. The Bennite Left had no other option than to accept this situation.

The left-wing of the LP was consequently undermined by the fact that it could not develop an alternative because it had to accept the ability of New Labour to win elections. Hence the left accommodated to the political economy of New Labour which could be defined as acceptance of the market and the limited role of the state in overcoming its imperfections. Hence the major expression of left wing opposition to Blair was connected to the issue of war in Iraq. The humanitarian pro-imperialism of New Labour was opposed by a popular anti-war movement. However this mass movement was limited to protest because it could not propose the overthrow of New Labour because that would mean the prospect of the election victory of the Tories. Instead the anti-war movement was limited to making ethical points about the brutality of war and avoided making any strategic approach of political opposition to New Labour. The left wing was limited by the fact that it could not challenge the ability of New Labour to win elections. The call for the overthrow of New Labour was restricted to a tiny revolutionary minority of the protestors.

In other words the era of New Labour should have led to the elaboration of an alternative to its standpoint. This process was never realised in terms of opposing the character of New Labour which could be described as the development of moderate Social Democracy in a post-Thatcherite world: “New Labour is post-Thatcherite:….we suggested that New Labour was part of a political engagement with the New Right and the changing economic, social and cultural conditions of the contemporary world and how that world should best be governed…….New Labour’s embrace of the market was as much to do with the limits of state control highlighted by the neo-liberals and the disintegration of Soviet style political economy as it was to do with the search for votes. As a result New Labour drew a line under many of the political, theoretical and policy arguments of the 1980’s and 1990’s. This is most clearly seen in questions of the balance between state and market in public policy making. Post-Thatcherism, social democracy would never be the same again.”(5) In other words the left of the LP had no answer to the argument that the sociological changes in the UK had promoted the creation of an electorate predisposed to supporting the pro-market policies of Thatcher. New Labour argued that these changes could not be ignored because of dogma and instead there had to be an acceptance of the market in a distinctively Social Democratic form. The Left had no answer to these arguments and instead became the moralistic critics of New Labour whilst lacking an alternative strategy and understanding of the class structure. What temporarily undermined the New Labour project was the 2008 recession. The role of pro-market policies was replaced by Keynesian techniques in order to try to tackle the crisis. Ultimately this led the Tories to claim that Gordon Brown had become economically irresponsible, and they began to support a deflationary response to the crisis. New Labour was temporarily discredited by this criticism and instead the radical leadership of Ed Miliband was accepted. But the defeat of the LP in the 2015 election led to the re-emergence of the supressed New Labour trend. Its hegemony was consolidated by the right-wing approach of the candidates for the LP leadership. The emphasis on the market, and deflationary economics had become commonplace. Once again the Left wing has no alternative to these Blairite politics.

This development is not unexpected because the defeat of the left wing within the LP was definitive with the accession to power of the forces of New Labour. The electoral defeats of the 1980’s discredited the attempts of the left wing to transform the LP in the direction of a democratic socialism that would combine parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of struggle. Instead the Kinnock modernisation of the LP ultimately resulted in the hegemony of New Labour, and Blair promoted the process of creating a tame party that would accept its policies: “By the year 2000, the old Parliamentary socialist project which the ‘new left’ had wanted to supersede was well and truly dead – at first weakened by its internal contradictions, and finally killed off by the ‘modernisers’. The project for a much fuller democratisation of British state and society through the much fuller democratisation of the Labour Party had also been decisively defeated. Every previous phase of the party’s history was characterised by prolonged struggles between the leadership and recognisably distinct, organised and programmatically informed left oppositions. New Labour has reconstructed the party so that virtually no room is allowed for this.”(6) The organisational changes that accompanied the domination of New Labour has led to the continual diminishing of the influence of the left wing of the LP so that the prospect of a left challenge to the supremacy of the existing leadership is virtually non-existent. Instead the LP has become a bourgeois organisation based on the following ideology: “But New Labour’s big idea was to accept definitively that global capitalism, and the political power of global capital, was a permanent fact of life, so that socialism, if it still meant anything at all, was a set of values that should guide public policy under capitalism, nothing more.”(7)

Consequently the legacy of Tony Benn should now be adopted by forces outside of the LP in terms of the recognition of the relationship between the struggle for socialism and democracy. Hence the defeat of Bennism has tragic implications: “It was also tragic, because the eventual defeat of the new left in the party removed the issue of a genuine democratisation of the state and economy from the agenda of British politics. When today’s ‘modernisers’ and the media belittle and denigrate the new left that emerged in the party in the 1970’s they conceal the fact that democratisation was its central theme. The Labour new left saw that democratising the state was a precondition for overcoming the injustices of capitalism, and that democratising the party – and enhancing its ‘educational’ role so as to develop popular capacities to rule - was a precondition for democratising the state.”(8)

These dynamic possibilities were ultimately not realised because the left was unable to provide an adequate answer to the criticism of the right-wing that its policies contributed to electoral defeats. The dynamism of the left wing contradicted the opportunist Parliamentary ambitions of the LP. Therefore the very struggle of the left wing to change the LP was perceived to be unpopular with the electorate. The left wing could answer this argument by suggesting that the struggle of the Left to change the LP also inspired the popular resistance to Thatcherism expressed by the miner’s strike and the Anti-Poll tax struggles. But activists within the LP increasingly rejected the aims of left wing and instead supported the arguments that contributed to the modernisation of the party. What was crucial was that the organisational changes introduced by Kinnock undermined the influence of the left wing: “He set in motion an organisational transformation that would culminate ten years later in the emergence of a new kind of party, more and more detached from what was left of the labour movement. The trade unions would lose much of their influence inside the party and would be told to expect no special favours from a future Labour government. Party membership would be expanded, and the influence of active members diluted and curbed. Control would be more and more frankly concentrated in the hands of a leadership elite of professional politicians, and above all, in the hands of the leader himself.”(9) The development of New Labour was the logical culmination of this transformation in that Blair and Brown could indicate that whilst Kinnock had begun the process of making the LP respectable, he was not successful in relation to ending the electoral supremacy of the Conservatives. Instead they recognised that it was necessary to be even more ruthless in the process of changing the LP. This development was inaugurated by the rewriting of Clause IV of the Party constitution. “What was to come along with the rewriting of Clause IV had already begun to appear by the spring of 1995: it was a broader New Labour offensive designed to shift the political culture in and around Labour and to further remodel its institutions so as to embed a new culture more firmly within the party…..It was perhaps inevitable that the election of a new leader and the prospect of victory and government would concentrate attention and authority in the hands of the leadership, but New Labour’s leaders had a grander ambition. They sought a permanent shift in the party’s centre of gravity that would prevent the party as an organisation from giving sustained aid and comfort to critics of the leadership either while in opposition or when it was in power. Blair was obsessed with the party’s historic tendency to charge its leaders with betrayal…..If the pattern was to be broken, it would require a structure of policy making in which the rules of the National Executive Committee and the party conference were much diminished and taken over by bodies more firmly in control of the leadership.”(10)

In other words the ideological hegemony of New Labour, combined with the organisational changes that have undermined inner party democracy, has meant that the possibility to transform the LP is very unlikely. In this context the election of Ed Miliband did not mean that the contemporary character of the LP had changed. Indeed, the election failure of the LP under Ed Miliband’s leadership has meant that the argument that electoral success can only be realised on the basis of the programme of New Labour has been reinforced. Consequently it is not surprising that the three major leadership candidates have adopted a Blairite standpoint. The other candidate Jeremy Corbyn, is a left-winger, but is unlikely to be in the eventual voting contest. Marxists should not support Corbyn because we should not promote the illusion that the LP can be changed. Instead the very ascendency of New Labour indicates that the attempt of the Bennite Left to transform the LP was a historic failure and that the character of the LP is ultimately defined by its prioritisation of electoral considerations rather than the promotion of socialist principles. The members of the LP have accepted the hegemony of New Labour because of its success in winning elections. Ed Miliband’s defeat in the 2015 election only reinforces the view that egalitarian politics are unpopular and the LP has to return to enthusiastic support of the market, economic prudence and respectability. Consequently the only principled avenue for anyone supporting socialist politics is to organise outside of the LP. The LP has reaffirmed its New Labour politics and support for a Post-Thatcherite world view and acceptance of globalisation. Hence the leadership candidates for the Labour leader effectively argue that the only recipe for success is to accept the limitations of global capitalism in order to repeat the famous victory of 1997.

In other words it is being argued that the recent election defeat was caused by the apparent fact that the Labour government of Gordon Brown resorted to Keynesian techniques in order to try and resolve the problems of the recession of 2008. This resulted in the legacy of a massive budget deficit. Therefore only when the LP regains its recent reputation for prudence will election success be possible. The lessons of 1997 have to be re-discovered: “The ‘new’ in New Labour had been intended to distance the party from past associations and past failures, but it also served to shape strategy and policy. As the party’s new leaders understood their history, a major reason for failure was that the party’s rhetoric and programme produced hopes that could not be met when it took office. From this perception had flowed a rigid determination to minimise campaign promises so as to reduce the pressure of expectations on performance. The election of 1997 was to be a model of an election effort that gave few hostages to fortune. But Blair and Brown went still further upon taking office and less than a week into their tenure announced their decision to give the Bank of England the freedom to set interest rates. The move was significant for what it did, but it was even more important as a symbol of how the government would handle the responsibility for managing the economy. Setting the Bank free signalled New Labour’s recognition of the limits that the workings of the world economy placed upon the government’s ability to steer the economy. It sent a message to investors that New Labour could be trusted to work within such constraints and not to seek to impose its will upon forces largely beyond its control; more tellingly it told Labour supporters and voters at large that the government could not be expected to intervene where intervention would not work.”(11)

In contrast to this successful strategy of moderation, financial orthodoxy and acceptance of the domination of the market, Miliband seemed to represent the return to the approach of Old Labour in terms of the advocacy of economic interventionism in order to advance the aim of egalitarianism. This standpoint apparently did not resonate with the voters because they no longer express an electorate sympathetic to these ideals. Instead the general conclusion reached is that the cautious moderation of New Labour in 1997 has to be replicated in the present. Hence we cannot demarcate the three major candidates for Labour leader in terms of being positioned on left or right. What is more accurate is to define them as specific varieties of New Labour. The more left-wing politics of Ed Miliband have been revealed to represent an exceptional interlude within a situation of the general domination of New Labour. Indeed it has been necessary to discredit the politics of Ed Miliband because they represent a timid opposition to the prevailing consensual support for the interests of global capitalism. The major candidates for Labour leader believe that they can obtain favourable coverage from the media by proclaiming their effective allegiance to the standpoint of New Labour. This means support for the politics of Blair and implicit rejection of the legacy of the period when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister.

The above viewpoint is meant to indicate that it is an illusion to believe that Andy Burnham is a left wing candidate for the LP leadership. Instead he has also reclaimed the legacy of New Labour and interpreted it in his own manner. However he is likely to win the contest because he is an able communicator of ideas and has an affable manner that would endear him to the voters. The alternative is not to promote support for Corbyn but is instead to develop an effective intellectual alternative to the ideas of New Labour. The Marxist Left has generally ignored this task because we have been content to identify New Labour with the interests of global capitalism. This is not an inaccurate definition but we have to understand the durability of New Labour in more profound terms and understand the reasons for its electoral success. New Labour has lasted longer than the regimes of Tony Blair or Gordon Brown. The ideology of New Labour is the only basis that the LP has for understanding its recent election defeat. Hence the organisational and political changes that New Labour introduced into the LP in the 1990’s have become permanent. It was the regime of Ed Miliband that proved to be an aberration that has been replaced by a return to the orthodoxy of New Labour. In other words we have to recognise that the standpoint of New Labour is one of the most powerful expressions of opposition to any resurgence of principled socialism. It is necessary to combat the latest forms of New Labour if we are to promote the revival of revolutionary socialism. This task will not be advanced if we continue to assert that New Labour is of temporary significance or is effectively reduced to the personality of Tony Blair. Instead we can suggest that the various forms of New Labour represent the adaptation of Social Democracy to the post-Thatcherite world. In that sense it has a tendency for convergence with Toryism and even rejects the politics of the SNP as being too radical. Hence contemporary New Labourism cannot be a principled alternative to Conservatism and it is an illusion to suggest that it represents any form of socialism. However the ideological strong point of New Labour is its claim to understand how election victories are possible. In this pragmatic manner it claims to be an alternative to the electoral strength of the Conservative Party. Thus it is necessary to seriously discuss this issue if we are to critique the standpoint of New Labour.

In a book about the Labour Party, Gregory Elliott explains that the process of modernisation inaugurated by Neil Kinnock had to tackle the problem of a society that seemed to be rejecting the values of Social Democracy: “The evolutionary projections upon which social democracy was based…..have been definitively contradicted by contemporary capitalism. That, in turn, has disaggregated the social agency upon which social democracy was predicated: national, manual, predominantly male, industrial working classes, whose social identity was underpinned by a homogenous culture of production and consumption. Therefore, the national statist regulationist programmes of social democracy have declined in feasibility; whilst its collectivist egalitarian values have lost credibility, both with sections of its own historic consistency and among the recomposed working class of the twentieth century. Never an offensive force against capitalism, social democracy is today scarcely a defensive power.”(12) The apparent process of embourgeoisment of the electorate meant the LP became a regional party with support apparently limited to the North, Scotland, Wales, and parts of the Midlands. The Thatcherite domination of the South-East, and other affluent areas, enabled it to obtain the necessary seats to win elections: “Distilled into a sound bite, Britain composed a ‘two-thirds society’, encompassing a ‘new’ working class of owner occupiers, living in the South, working in the service economy, orientated to the private sector (in transport, health and education); and set against the ‘one-third society’ including a ‘traditional’ working class of council tenants, those living in the North, unionized heavy industry or public sector workers, the unemployed and dependants of the welfare state. The cumulative impact of such social transformation was the drastic decline of ‘labour’ as a unified and conscious political constituency, a reality attested by the atrophy of the Labour Party.”(13)

Given these adverse social circumstances, the LP under the leadership of Neil Kinnock believed that there was no other option than to adapt to the society created by Thatcherism. This meant becoming more right-wing and repudiating traditional Labour policies like unilateral nuclear disarmament. Hence the LP rejected any suggestion that it could attempt to promote an ideological struggle in favour of egalitarianism and against the limitations of the market: “The Labour leadership discounted the role of Labour’s actual derelictions in its electoral misfortunes. It bought the analysis that the party was the prisoner of social change unless it adapted to the attitudes and aspirations supposedly deriving from it. The relevant political strategy was to reorient Labour away from its historic identity as a class party: away from trade unionism, collectivism, egalitarianism, ‘planning’, nationalization, etc.”(14) The left-wing was unable to oppose this right-wing trajectory because it could not outline credible arguments for socialism in this Thatcherite world. Instead it became a tendency that opposed the policies of the LP leadership whilst not advocating anything constructive or feasible. The development of a new socialist strategy that could rival the coherence of the Alternative Economic strategy did not occur. Instead the LP right-wing achieved political and ideological hegemony. This meant the conditions were being created for the ascendency of New Labour in the aftermath of the general election defeat of 1992. The domination of New Labour has never been challenged, apart from the brief aberration represented by the regime of Ed Miliband.

If the left of the LP, and the left in general, is to develop a credible strategy that can challenge the hegemony of New Labour we have to accept that it is necessary to locate the basis of the possibilities for the collective agency of the working class in relation to the social changes that have occurred over the last thirty years. This means we have to connect the contemporary importance of individualism with the role of community and promote the formation of organisations that have a co-operative character. Instead of an exclusive emphasis on the ‘organised labour movement’, or trade unions, we have to develop a strategy of opposition to austerity that involves communities and all the diverse strata of the working class, from home owners to council tenants. The point we are making is that social diversity does not preclude the possibility of united action. However in order to promote a mass movement against austerity we have to promote ethical values of co-operation and solidarity that have been eroded by thirty years of the advance of market capitalism. In this context study of the works of R.H Tawney are relevant because of his view that am emphasis on profit making is unethical and can be opposed with the moral values of socialism. (15) The point being made is that we cannot expect that people influenced by market capitalism are automatically amenable to opposing the policies of a Conservative government. Instead we have to conduct a popular ideological struggle in order to promote support for the values and aims of socialism. In a sense we have to re-introduce socialism to generations of people who are unaware of the legacy of Marx, Bevan and Benn. However, this process cannot be conducted in the abstract in terms of making appeals to a largely heroic and mythical working class. Instead we have to understand that society has changed but instead of justifying pro-market conclusions we can outline suggestions for how to conceive of socialism in the world of globalisation: “The radical egalitarian conception of social justice is not restricted to the nation state as the only appropriate social arena for egalitarianism. The principle that all people should have broadly equal access to the necessary social and material means to live flourishing lives applies to all people, and thus at its deepest level it is a global principle for humanity.”(16)

In other words opposing the Blairite domination of the LP means criticising the view that changes within society mean the demise of the possibility to realise socialism. Thus instead of accepting a right-wing agenda of adaptation to the market we should try to articulate what democratic socialism can be in the situation of globalisation. For reasons of theoretical defensiveness and dogma the left wing of the LP has not effectively opposed the views of New Labour which have an ascendency within the Labour movement. Hence we should utilise the Labour leadership campaign not to maximise the votes for Jeremy Corbyn but instead to oppose the standpoint of New Labour. However it is already obvious that Corbyn wants to tackle the LP leadership on issues of policy and avoid the more substantive questions concerning the ideological limitations of New Labour. He emphasises issues like the re-nationalisation of the railways rather than making the contemporary case for socialism. Consequently the Labour left seem to be old-fashioned and living in the past. This means the vision of Tony Benn is not being articulated, and consequently we lack any meaningful conception of what is meant by democratic socialism. The result of these limitations is that the ideological hegemony of New Labour is not being challenged and instead it seems the left-winger is only taking part in the Labour leadership contest in order to obtain some publicity. The Marxist left do not provide any superior understanding of the issues at stake and instead try to ignore the ideological importance of the hegemony of New Labour. This stance is not surprising because they have also never provided a theoretical alternative to Blairism. Instead the conception that the LP is a bourgeois workers party, because of its links to the trade unions, is utilised in order to avoid making a critique of the role of New Labour. The lack of ideological contestation means that the New Labour transformation of the LP is unchallenged. It is able to elaborate its values and aims without the opposition of genuinely left-wing and socialist forces. Thus the left wing is on the defensive when the Blairites blame Ed Miliband for the recent electoral defeat. The left wing is characterised by its unwillingness to tackle the ideological hegemony of New Labour.

The contradictions and limitations of the Marxist left concerning the LP are indicated by the views of Workers Power with regards to the leadership contest. They argue that the LP is characterised by its link to the trade unions and any attempt to end this relationship should be opposed: “That would mark a historic defeat for the working class movement in the UK and should be opposed by all socialists, whether in the Labour Party or outside of it.”(17) The article outlines the limitations of Ed Miliband’s leadership and suggests the election campaign of the LP was compromised by the inability to defend the public expenditure measures undertaken in the recession period. It concludes that: “For Labour’s parliamentary leadership and for the union leaders, electoral victory means convincing the capitalist class that Labour despite its roots in the working class, can be a safe pair of hands to hold governmental office.”(18) In other words the article admits that the overriding character of the LP is defined by its connections to Blairite ideology, and that the actions of the LP leadership are motivated by the interests of capitalism. Workers Power accept that that the LP continually undermines the importance of its connections to the labour movement and working class, or a situation of: ‘the preparedness of both its Left and Right wings to subordinate the political independence of the working class to its pro capitalist political programme.’(19) However there is no discussion of the character of the reactionary ideology that justifies the rejection of a socialist strategy by the leadership of the LP. Instead the article indulges in an anti-scientific diatribe about the supposed elitism of the middle class and how the pressures of this social strata are responsible for the pro capitalist stance of the LP: “The fact that the working class lacks an organisation focusing and sharpening its class instincts into political consciousness encourages the middle class to aggrandise themselves at the expense of the workers in their council houses rather than the rich in their mansions.”(20)

Instead of indulging in this diatribe about the supposed reactionary actions of the middle class – who are probably actually working class people who own their own homes – the article would be more constructively engaged in an analysis of the social structure of the UK that explains the ascendency of the Blairite form of social democracy within the LP. However after emphasising the influence of the pro capitalist forces within the LP, the article does a U-Turn and calls upon the LP to support a mass moment of resistance to the Tory policy of austerity. This prospect will never happen because of the very influence of New Labour ideology which means the LP leadership will be primarily concerned to make the LP a serious contender for office. Hence concerns with respectability will be more important than supporting extra-Parliamentary action against the deflationary measures of the Conservative government. Marxists should not promote any illusions that the LP will be an ally in any development of popular struggle against the Tories. Instead the LP will be an obstacle opposing mass action precisely because of its right-wing reformist character. The call to defend the union link is also a diversion because the trade union bureaucracy will support the attempts of the LP leadership to undermine the development of a mass movement against austerity. Hence the link of the union bureaucrats and the LP will be reinforced in terms of their objections to any militant movement that could distract attention from the primary task of electing a Labour government in 2020. Instead of this understanding the article defends a strategy of putting pressure on the LP and the trade union bureaucracy in order to mobilise action against the Tories: “Labour and the trade union bureaucracy remain the leaders of a huge, organised and politically aware section of the working class. Only by mobilising this force, alongside the vanguard of the activists who have already seen through Labourism, can we force the Tories from power. Without their involvement, there is little hope of stopping austerity, let alone reversing the cuts and fighting to take control of society’s wealth and redistributing it.”(21)

This strategy is an illusion because of the underestimation of the significance of the domination of the LP by the adherents of New Labour. Instead of wasting time and energy on an illusory attempt to put pressure on the LP to support extra-Parliamentary action we should dedicate ourselves to promoting the influence of Marxism and socialist culture. Only in this principled manner can we realise the transformation of the trade unions that is required in order to develop a mass movement of struggle. In the present circumstances the LP leaders and the trade union bureaucrats are united in opposition to the generation of a mass movement against austerity, and we should be emphatic that popular struggle will only occur when the influence of this reactionary alliance is weakened. This understanding is eventually recognised by Workers Power when they call for the mass struggle to create a dynamic that promotes the formation of a new workers party to rival the LP. They eventually accept that the ideological and political hegemony of the LP – in concert with the trade union leaders – will always undermine the development of mass struggle. Yet in a contradictory and perplexing manner they insist that mass struggle can only be begun under the auspices of the LP and trade union leaders. This is a confusing and perplexing strategy that attempts to disguise its real aim which is the formation of a new workers party. Principled Marxists would not hesitate and suggest that only the practical influence of Marxism can generate the prospect of effective struggle against the Conservative government. The LP will be opposed to this development in the name of electoral success and the trade union leaders are likely to support this reactionary standpoint.

In the article: ‘Tories Prepare 100 Day Offensive’, the strategic emphasis is different. Instead of a suggestion that mass action requires the role of the LP the argument is modified, and it is accepted that the development of mass action will only occur in the context of the opposition of the Blairites and the right wing trade union leaders. Hence industrial action will immediately generate: ‘efforts to get the unions and the left to establish a new mass working class party’. This task will be connected to undermining the ideological influence of New Labour, and so the struggle is theoretical: ‘because we have to defeat ‘new analyses that will echo the Blairite offensive and throw responsibility for the defeat back on the working class itself, reviving Eurocommunist narratives about the working class being inherently incapable of beating the British bosses and their party without a strategic alliance with liberalism’(22) This article finally acknowledges the importance of the dominant influence of New Labour within the LP: “Now, scarcely able to conceal their delight at Labour’s defeat, the Blairites are on the rampage, blaming the fallen Miliband for alienating Middle England with mansion taxes and rent controls……The Blairites argue that no left-wing Labour Party can ever be elected and the party must move back to the centre, break with the unions, and reach out to the aspirational middle classes and workers in the new economy.”(23) Unfortunately the New Labour standpoint is dismissed dogmatically and superficially as reactionary rubbish and is crudely repudiated with calls for the renewal of the class struggle. The opportunity to critique New Labour is rejected and instead dogmatic emphasis on the potential for mass action is emphasised. However this confident rejection of the influence of Blairism does go alongside reluctant acceptance that the left wing has been marginalised in the contemporary LP, and so the conclusion is to support a left wing challenge for the Labour leadership without conviction. The real aim is to promote the new working class party: “In the political struggle we need to encourage and support any left-wingers left in the Labour Party to stand firm against the Blairite challenge…..But we can put next to no hope in such a challenge being successful, nor in the soft left doing anything other than knuckling under the Blairite restoration. Therefore, we need to redouble efforts to move towards the formation of a new working class party.”(24) Finally the connection between New Labour domination of the LP and the urgent need for a new working class party is established. The austerity policy of the Tories can only be defeated by extra-parliamentary struggle and this possibility cannot be realised under the domination of a Blairite LP. Instead as Workers Power argue: “This means we need a new party whose number one priority is waging the class struggle, fighting to beat the Tory attacks through action, before the next election. This means the party should debate and adopt an action programme that sets out the way to beat the Tories and links it to the fight for an anti-capitalist workers government and social revolution.”(25)

However whilst justifying a dogmatic defence of revolutionary politics in this article a promise is also made to oppose the ideas of revisionism and New Labour that attempt to discredit the class struggle: ‘In the theoretical struggle, we will need to challenge the inevitable ideological consequence of defeat: a surge of revisionism from the left-wing intelligentsia, which jumps at setbacks for the working class to promote strategic accommodations to the middle class and to liberalism. In 2015 they will suggest that the working class and the labour movement cannot defeat the Tories, that structural changes in British capitalism like the decline of manufacturing mean that the working class cannot win’.(26) This is a welcome comment that recognises the necessity of intellectual opposition to the ideological hegemony of New Labour. It is to be hoped that this promise of theoretical polemic will be realised and that new arguments are provided in order to indicate that the class struggle has not become anachronistic because of structural changes within British society. At present New Labour is ideologically hegemonic on these issues because of the very failure of revolutionary Marxism to provide an alternative to the argument that the working class has changed and so cannot be any longer receptive to left-wing arguments. It is the very fact that the LP, via the influence of New Labour, represents the generation of pessimism about socialism which indicates its unsuitability for being a political agency of socialism. Instead the LP is one of the most sophisticated defenders of bourgeois ideology. This situation expresses an important reason why we need a new workers party. But it is no longer satisfactory to oppose New Labour with clichés and slogans or action demands. Instead we should attempt to popularise the work of Professor Meszaros who has shown that contemporary capitalism cannot overcome the importance of the capital-labour relation and is unable to transcend the contradictions that contribute to it decline(27) However this is a work of political economy and does not explain the ideological reasons why people might vote Conservative or UKIP. Hence we have to do additional studies that elaborate the contemporary reasons for supporting socialism and oppose various forms of defence of capitalism.

Workers Power seem committed to this theoretical task but it is important that justification of dogmatism does not obscure the ability to carry out this task in the most convincing and detailed manner. It is not sufficient to repudiate the reactionary motives of the Blairites because we also have to engage with their ideas. To define the New Labour standpoint as pessimism is inadequate because they do not share our aims of the socialist transformation of society. Instead we have to critique their fundamental idea, which concerns the reconciliation of the market and globalisation with social democratic goals. We have to indicate how the contemporary world is still maturing for socialism and this perspective is not seriously undermined by the significance of neo-liberalism. In contrast New Labour has reconciled itself to the market and globalisation, which does not mean that it is characterised by pessimism and is instead optimistic that the market can be reconciled with the aims of social justice, and in this manner the necessity of socialism is transcended. What is the element of pessimism in the standpoint of New Labour is their evaluation that left-wing ideas will not win elections. This is why they are dedicated to ending the influence of the left-wing within the LP. Hence our message to the left-wing of the LP should be: accept that the era of a left-wing LP is over and join us in the struggle to construct a new workers party. Only in this manner can we oppose the influence of New Labour within the working class. This is also the message that Workers Power should be making without hesitation and in emphatic terms. Instead there is inconsistency in their standpoint. This equivocation can only compromise the struggle for socialism.

Furthermore, Workers Power do not adequately recognise that the reason for the ascendency of New Labour within the LP is because they seem to have the elusive recipe for electoral success. Whilst the left-wing has a historic experience of electoral failure, New Labour is able to triumphantly suggest that it has a popular appeal and the result has been victory at the polls. It is for this reason that the major contenders for the LP leadership have enthusiastically embraced the views of New Labour and rejected the semi-left legacy of Ed Miliband. The result of this understanding was the repudiation of any form of egalitarianism and instead the adoption of a pro-big business agenda. This development signifies that the LP is a pro capitalist party and is dedicated to the reconciliation of the market with its values. Indeed we could argue that this standpoint has represented its character since the period of the Kinnock modernisation, and the right wing resolution of the inner party struggle between the right and left wings of the party. Hence the ultimate creation of New Labour was the logical break between it and the traditional forms of Social Democracy in terms of ideology and programme: “The deeper disappointment with New Labour reflected, rather, an emerging awareness that in so far as this version of social democracy did reflect a definitive break with the past, it did so in terms of repudiating crucial concerns which social democracy had contributed to the struggle for democracy and social justice in the twentieth century. Even if social democracy has always been mainly about regulating capitalism, the point of the earlier regulation was normally to oppose or limit the power of the capitalists, the writ of the market and the commodification of social life. The type of regulation New Labour engaged in, however, based its validity on capitalist criteria – or as Blair put it, ‘working with the grain of the market’. Whereas mainstream social democracy traditionally saw competition as a constraint on their goals, giving rise to social costs and posing problems that needed to be managed or coped with, New Labour actively embraced competition as its own main objective.”(27)

This pro market standpoint of New Labour has been eagerly accepted by the major candidates in the LP leadership campaign. This acceptance has smoothly occurred because the New Labour legacy of the Blair regime has never been replaced by an effective alternative. The programme of Ed Miliband was a collection of confused policies that aimed to promote egalitarianism, but he only succeeded in alienating the electorate because of his apparent endorsement of a type of socialist policy. Hence the conclusion that is reached by the major candidates is that the only effective approach that could result in electoral success is to endorse the approach of New Labour. This is the meaning of the compliments being made about the creative role of small and big business. Furthermore, New Labour type moderation means supporting some Conservative policies such as the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU. In other words the only conclusion that contemporary Social Democracy can make about the significance of neo-liberalism and globalisation is to accept these aspects of the changing world. The approach of state intervention is considered to be too extreme, and its advocacy would result in electoral defeat. This is the lesson made about Gordon Brown futile attempt to expand public expenditure in order to try to resolve the recession of 2008. The concerns of Social Democracy in the past which advocated the utilisation of state intervention in order to promote equality has been replaced with the perspective of subordination of the state to the requirements of the market and the creation of a skilled workforce. This is the standpoint of the major candidates in the LP leadership contest.

Whilst calling for a new working class party, Workers Power also make the ambiguous claim that: “With nine million votes, the affiliation of several large trade unions comprising millions of members, with strong growth of support in London and as the official opposition, the very notion that Labour is about to disappear, that we have heard from some of the more superficial commentators on the left, is simply absurd.”(28) This comment is empirically true, but what it glosses over is the importance of the New Labour domination of the LP. This party has no connection with principled socialism and its aims and values, and so will not encourage popular struggle against the Tories. Hence it is an organisation that is not inspired by the vision of a Tony Benn, and instead the character of the party is dominated by the role of a professional elite that is primarily concerned with electoral success rather than the promotion of socialism. Thus we should not use the formal size and influence of the LP as an excuse for delaying the carrying out of the task of promoting the formation of a new party. Nor should we expect the trade union leaders to assist Marxist’s in the attempt to create a new workers party. Hence we should not delay the development of the process to create the new workers party until we have widespread support from the trade unions. Instead we should am to unite Marxists within a single organisation, and attempt to overcome divisions between Left Unity and TUSC. Workers Power are correct to suggest that the aim of opposing austerity can promote the development of a mass popular party. Even partial success in the attempt to create a party that promotes the formation of a mass movement against austerity will be the basis to attract support from rank and file trade unionists. In this context the LP will be discredited by its failure to support mass action and the result will be increasing membership of the new workers party. However the major problem will be the inability of the trade union leadership to support opposition to austerity and its rejection of the necessity of a principled alternative to the LP. Hence we have to build rank and file committees within unions that can advocate a more militant perspective. Only with this development can a mass movement against austerity become effective.

The LP will oppose any prospect of this type of possibility because its aim is electoral success and not making progress in the class struggle. This is precisely why we have to create a principled workers party that will not act as an effective subordinate to the LP and instead aims to replace the LP as a party with majority working class support. In this context the workers party will have to develop arguments as to why acceptance of the perspectives of neo-liberalism and the interests of the market have to be replaced with the aim of democratic socialism. It will be an error if the workers party considers its primary task is to encourage militant struggle against austerity whilst the hegemonic ideological task of providing credible arguments for socialism is neglected. What we will have to constantly remind people is that the LP as an instrument of New Labour cannot advance socialism because of its adaptation to capitalism and therefore the only political expression of an alternative to capitalism will be the new workers party. However this means the revolutionary organisation has to motivate ‘socialism from below’ or the development of social change via the creative actions of working people. Only with this development can we indicate that the relevance of the LP has been superseded by events: “The extra-Parliamentary power of capital can only be matched by labour’s extra-parliamentary force and mode of action. This all the more important in view of the complete disintegration of parliamentary reformism of the labour movement, in the interests of delivering labour to capital as fragmented electoral fodder.”(30)

In other words the LP will continue to be of relevance as long as the working class does not acquire sufficient consciousness and militancy that is able to provide adequate reasons why the perspectives of Social Democracy should be superseded. Hence failure in the class struggle actually nourishes the ability of the LP to argue that it is the most effective expression of the ability to uphold social justice within a market economy. This is why the LP contends that strikes should not occur because they only undermine its electoral popularity. Marxism rejects this standpoint as opportunist but its approach is flawed by the failure to assess in an effective manner the programme of New Labour. The reasons for the ascendency of New Labour are ignored in favour of an emphasis on the necessity of militant struggle. What is not recognised is that one indispensable reason for generating mass action is the ideological undermining of the credibility of New Labour. Workers Power recognise this connection but they cannot provide reasonable arguments that would repudiate the ideological domination of the LP by the adherents of New Labour. Furthermore, they do not answer the view that strikes are less effective in obtaining objectives than electoral success. Instead the emphasis on action is made without repudiating the ideology of New Labour. The simple point is not made that only the generation of a mass movement with socialist objectives can undermine the interests of the market and deflation. In contrast, the LP is opposed to strikes precisely because of its adaptation to the market. New Labour supports capitalism and so is suspicious of the need for strikes against austerity because victory in the class struggle would imply the necessity for economic expansion rather than the sensible option of deflation and budget orthodoxy.

Ultimately New Labour is against strikes because they suggest the dynamics of socialism rather than adaptation to neo-liberalism. For this reason the LP is unlikely to defend strikes and therefore the working class requires a new political instrument to uphold its aspirations. The LP could argue that the working class is no longer militant, and this standpoint seems to be vindicated by social analysis. However opposition to austerity is popular and this aim could become the basis to develop genuine support for militant action. The ideological inability of the LP to support strikes can only generate progress in the attempt to construct a new workers party. However, it will not be sufficient to create a worker’s party on the basis of adherence to militant action. Instead this organisation will have to demarcate itself from the aims and values of New Labour. Failure to realise this task will mean that the workers party will merely be an expression of militancy rather than socialism. The opposite to the pro capitalist ideology of New Labour is an emphasis on democratic socialism. But this recognition of theoretical tasks has been underdeveloped and instead has been the concern of a few individuals like Ralph Miliband. (31) The point being made is that it not sufficient to create a worker’s party on the basis of Labourism, or left reformism. Instead we need the creation of a party that is in ideological struggle with New Labour. This point is formally recognised by Workers Power, but will they recognise this task as serious and requiring extensive theoretical work? The point is that it is straightforward to oppose New Labour when reducing its politics to a caricature but what is more important is to attempt to understand it as accurately as possible in order to convincingly provide an alternative. This process involves understanding the popular appeal of New Labour. It would be an evasion to portray New Labour as nothing more than the activity of a small professional elite instead it is a coherent ideology with systematic aims and values. This means in providing an alternative we have to elaborate our own consistent ideas and conception of socialism. Simplistic rejection is not sufficient, rather we have to outline in a perceptive manner why New Labour is not a feasible alternative to socialism. Only in this principled manner can we construct a convincing form of an alternative.

Charles Gradnitzer argues that Jeromy Corbyn’s principled performance on the recent televised Labour leadership debate was an indication why he should be supported: “His performance during the hustings on Newsnight on June 17 demonstrated he was the only supportable candidate. He drew a clear line between himself and the other candidates, never capitulating to anti migrant chauvinism, putting forward a clear anti-austerity message, championing the welfare state and opposing imperialist wars.”(32) However a decent and principled performance in the leadership debate is not a sufficient reason to vote for Corbyn. The point is that a good vote for Corbyn will do nothing to alter or undermine the New Labour character of the LP and its domination by the standpoint of right-wing Social Democracy. The left-wing of the LP is marginalised and defensive, and in this regard it is significant that whilst Corbyn argued he was for equality he made no mention of socialism. Thus whilst Corbyn outlined defensive reasons to vote for him he did not provide a perspective that was as compelling as Tony Benn’s arguments in favour of democratic socialism. It was also significant that Liz Kendall provided the most effective arguments of the leadership candidates. She is the logical successor of the politics of Tony Blair, and outlined with confidence why the LP has to adapt to the policies of Conservatism. In contrast Andy Burnham and Yvettte Cooper were ineffectual. In other words Liz Kendall knows that she has won the argument that the LP has to return to the moderation of New Labour if it is to win the next election. None of the other candidates had a convincing alternative to this point. Consequently we can conclude that the LP is compromised by its preoccupation with electoral success. This aim is more important than principles and is the reason why the Labour left is always marginalised. Hence instead of promoting illusions that a sizeable vote for Jeremy Corbyn will somehow change the LP we should instead concentrate on trying to build a genuine socialist party. A party that is guided by intransigent principles and not expediency, and which aims to promote the development of class struggle rather than manage capitalism. The opportunity to change the LP ended with the ultimate failure of the Bennite attempt to transform it, and the contemporary left-wing are defeated and tired.

However Gradnitzer is optimistic, He claims: “But the campaign to shift Labour left should not end in September when the new leader is elected. It needs to be the start of a more powerful movement to transform the Labour Party into an instrument for working class advance – an ally in the Marxist struggle for international socialism.”(33) This prediction will never happen. Instead the durable New Labour character of the LP will ensure that it remains a reliable agency for the political management of capitalism. The ideological character of the LP means that its members will predominantly prioritise the issue of electoral success above supporting the aims of socialism. Hence the conclusion made from the recent general election is about how to make the LP sufficiently moderate and therefore capable of winning the next contest for a Parliamentary majority. This means the contest between Yvette Cooper, Andy Burnham and Liz Kendall is about who will be able to present the most convincing argument in favour of respectability and acceptance of deflationary economics. In contrast, Jeremy Corbyn cannot represent an influential voice because his standpoint is considered to be inherently unpopular. Thus instead of supporting a futile cause, the left-wing Labour MP’s should be brave and split in order to form a new workers party. They should be prepared to put principles before Parliamentary careers. In this manner the interests of socialism would undergo a genuine advance.

Weekly Worker republishes their theses on the Labour Party in order to develop arguments in favour of Jeremy Corbyn standing for the leadership. (34) They argue that whilst the LP has been characterised by a pro-capitalist leadership it has also had a relationship to the working class and trade unions that mean: “Despite Blairism, New Labour and the abandonment of the old clause four, the Labour Party must still be defined as a bourgeois workers party.”(35) There are no systematic arguments provided in favour of this definition and viewpoint. Instead their analysis of the history of the LP actually seems to indicate that the right-wing will always dominate the LP. Hence: “Left reformists tend to compromise with the right in the name of getting elected and are thereby doomed never to secure any lasting or meaningful control over the Labour Party machine, let alone the commanding heights of the Parliamentary Labour Party.”(36) The logical conclusions of this historical analysis are not made. Instead by ignoring the importance of the recent development of New Labour the CPGB can uphold a conception of what they want the LP to be rather than analyse what it is. Thus despite the contemporary significance of right-wing supremacy they consider that the ultimate socialist potential of the LP can be realised: “The Labour Party can be made into a real party of labour. By that we communists mean establishing the Labour Party as a united front for all pro working class partisans and organisations. Undemocratic bans and proscriptions should be rescinded and all communist, revolutionary socialist and left groups encouraged to affiliate.”(37) But it is the very development of New Labour that means this perspective is futile. The result of New Labour domination is that the most extreme form of social democratic ideology is hegemonic and this results in opposition to any form of genuine socialism. In this situation the left wing is marginalised and cannot begin a meaningful struggle to transform the LP. This is why since New Labour has become influential there has been no repeat of the left and right struggles that occurred in the era of Bevan and Benn. Instead the left-wing is small and demoralised and defensive.

Consequently the CPGB perspective to transform the LP is illusory: “Winning the Labour Party for democracy, the working class and Marxism necessarily involves a protracted struggle against the right wing. These careerists have no legitimate place in the labour movement. The pro-capitalist, pro imperialist right must be drive out.”(38) This strategy is dogmatically optimistic because it implies the right wing are a minority who can be overcome by militant forms of political struggle. In actuality the domination of the right wing defines the character of the Labour Party and the small left wing is an unwanted intrusion. Instead of adhering to these crudely optimistic perspectives about transforming the LP we should recognise reality and accept that it has become an agency of global capitalism. The only principled conclusion that we can make from this situation is to develop an alternative perspective about promoting the creation of a new workers party. This party will be in competition with the LP and uphold democratic socialism rather than adapt to neo-liberalism and the market. This approach is a more accurate expression of contemporary realities rather than a dogmatic defence of the conclusions drawn from the abstract definition of bourgeois workers party. The CPGB analysis is ultimately flawed by reliance on events in the 1920’s. They do not consider that Lenin’s analysis is historically specific and so conclusions should be modified in order to be compatible with changed circumstances. Hence the CPGB do not recognise the significance of the Blairite counterrevolution and the ideological transformation that has occurred with the generation of New Labour. Instead of the dogmatic repetition of the views of Lenin we need an analysis of the LP that can recognised the importance of contemporary developments. In contrast the CPGB do their best to ignore the significance of New Labour. These omissions are necessary in order to uphold the dogmatic view that the LP can still be transformed by political struggle. An alternative strategy is required that is able to acknowledge the changing character of the LP and the crucial necessity for the formation of an alternative working class party that is genuinely in favour of the promotion of socialism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Charles Gradnitzer: It Can Still Be Done, In Weekly Worker, 1062, June 11th 2015 p12

(2) ibid p12

(3)James E.Cronin: New Labour’s Pasts, Pearson’s Education Ltd, Harlow, 2004 p236-237

(4)Matt Beech: The Political Philosophy of New Labour, Tauris Academic Studies, London, 2006 p106-107

(5)Stephen Driver and Luke Martell: New Labour, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2006p3-4

(6)Leo Panitch and Colin Leys: The End of Parliamentary Socialism, second edition: Verso, 2001 p290

(7) ibid p14

(8) ibid p65

(9) ibid p218-219

(10Cronin op cit p387

(11) ibid p417

(12)Gregory Elliott: Labourism and the English Genius, Verso, London, 1993 p17

(13) ibid p157

(14) ibid p159

(15)Geoffrey Foote: The Labour Party’s Political Thought, Third edition, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, p72-83

(16)Erik Olin Wright: Envisioning Real Utopias, Verso, London, 2010 p17

(17)KD Tait: We Need to Talk about Labour Workers Power, June 2015, number 384 p3

(18) ibid p3

(19) ibid p3

(20) ibid p3

(21) ibid p3

(22)Workers Power editorial: Tories prepare a 100 day offensive p4

(23) ibid p4

(24) ibid p5

(25) ibid p5

(26) ibid p5

(27)Professor Meszaros: Beyond Capital, Merlin, London 1995

(28)Panitch and Leys op cit p p287

(29)Workers Power, 100 days op cit p5

(30)Meszaros op cit p736

(31)Ralph Miliband: Socialism in a Sceptical Age, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994

(32)Charles Gradnitzer: Register for Corbyn, In: Weekly Worker June 18 2015, No: 1063 p6

(33) ibid p6

(34)CPGB: Theses On the Labour Party, In Weekly Worker June 18th 2015, NO 1063 p7

(35) ibid p7

(36) ibid p7

(37) ibid p7

(38) ibid p7