UNDERSTANDING THE CLASS STRUGGLE

The recent defeat of the Corbyn led Labour party in the general election is one more indication of the apparent failure of left-wing ideas to have a consistent appeal to the working class. These developments seem to suggest that the aims of socialism have no consistent popular appeal and instead the opposing approach of nationalism and support for the present capitalist system seem to be more durable and able to attract the mass support of the working class. Hence the approach of socialism is not able to provide a consistent and effective alternative to the popular support generated for the continuation of the capitalist system. There seem to be few Marxist works which attempt to explain this situation in revolutionary terms. One of the few is the book written by Ralph Miliband: “Marxism and Politics’ (Aakar Books: Delhi 2006) Miliband is aware that the major Marxists did not outline the difficulties involved in the process of the realisation of socialism, except for the important work of Gramsci. Instead there was an emphasis on the analysis of capitalism combined with the elaboration of various revolutionary strategies by people like Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, and this meant that the ability of the capitalist system to promote the situation of the accommodation of the working class with the present economic mode of production was not analysed in a systematic manner. But we also have to suggest that with the continuation of capitalism and the failure to develop effective forms of mass opposition to this system indicates the urgency involved in relation to discussion of the apparent inability to generate an influential revolutionary opposition to capitalism. Instead it seems that the working class in international terms has come to terms with the domination of the present economic system and is prepared to accept this situation and so as a result is not prepared to facilitate opposition to capitalism that will generate the possibility of the realisation of an alternative such as socialism.

Unintentionally Miliband outlines how the present situation of a general political stability of the present capitalist system seems to undermine the credibility of a Marxist approach based on the dynamism of the class struggle and its generation of the possibility of revolutionary change. He defines the Marxist standpoint in the following terms: “In a Marxist perspective …. conflict is inherent in the class system, incapable of solution within that system. Eruptions, outbursts, revolts, revolutions are only the most viable manifestations of a permanent alienation and conflict, signs that the contradictions in the social system are growing and that the struggle between contending classes is assuming sharper or irreversible forms. These contending classes are locked in a situation of domination and subjection from which there is no escape except through the total transformation of the mode of production.”(p19) This comment may have had credibility for various periods in the past when the capitalist system seem to be challenged by the emergence of mass opposition of working people, bur the situation as changed in the recent period. There is apparently no longer any expression of credible popular opposition to the present capitalist system. Instead the major allegiance seems to be that of support for a given nation and the economy of capitalism on which it is based. Furthermore, the influence of Marxism is effectively insignificant and so the organisations that support this approach are unable to influence the political situation in any effective manner. Instead it seems that the working class has become reconciled to the capitalist system despite its continuing economic limitations. Therefore when Miliband contends that the emphasis of Marxism is on the importance of class domination and class conflict this understanding has to be qualified by the character of the recent situation which has been based on political stability and the apparent increasing acceptance by the working class of the continuation of capitalism. Such a development was obviously reinforced by the demise of Stalinism and the apparent serious discrediting of what could have been considered to the alternative of socialism. In this context it would seem that the system of capitalism was invincible despite the continuation of the importance of periods of economic crisis. The point was that the expression of discontent within the population caused by the limitations of capitalism no longer resulted in definite support for the realisation of a socialist alternative. Capitalism may not have been able to overcome the manifestation of discontent within society, but it was able to undermine the transformation of this aspect into becoming a serious and effective promotion of the aspiration for the realisation of a socialist alternative. In this context the continuation of the exploitation of the workers within the relations of production seemed to have become compatible with the development of the political stability of the present system.

Miliband uncritically suggests that the exploitative character of capitalism will generate the development of class struggle that can result in the overthrow of the system: “As already noted, the conflict essentially stems from the determination of the dominant classes to extract as much work as possible from the subject classes; and, conversely, from the attempts of these classes to change the terms and conditions of their subjection, or to end it altogether. In relation to capitalism, the matter is expressed by Marx in terms of the imperative necessity for the owners and controllers of capital to extract the largest possible amount of surplus value from the labour force, and in terms of the latter’s attempt either to reduce that amount, or to bring the system to an end. The first alternative involves the attempt to introduce reforms in the operation of capitalism; the second involves its transcendence.”(p20-21) But the point is that this perspective can only express the possibilities of developments in relation to the character of capitalism. There is no inevitability in relation to this potential. Instead there may be the generation of important economic, political and ideological reasons that would undermine the credibility and accuracy of this understanding of Marx. Primarily the period of reforms indicated the possibility to improve the situation of the working class without the apparent necessity of the realisation of a revolutionary approach. Furthermore, the period of the recent offensive of capital against labour has apparently indicated various limitations in the economic and political strength of the working class. It would seem that the present capitalist system has an aspect of durability and resilience that was not anticipated by Marx, and as a result his predictions of the demise of the system seem to have become dogmatic. Furthermore, it has been difficult to create influential and principled revolutionary parties able to promote the aim of the socialist alternative to capitalism in an effective manner. Instead support for various political parties that uphold the capitalist system has remained durable and influential. In contrast the Marxist parties have remained small and often divided into what seems to be irrelevant organisations. Interestingly Miliband seems to have anticipated these developments when he accepts that the division of society into opposing classes with diverse interests need not result in a situation of polarisation and antagonism that results in the generation of the possibility of alternatives. He comments: “This of course raises the whole question of the validity or otherwise of Marx and Engels belief in the inevitability of revolution, in other words of a decisive settlement of accounts between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, out of which a new social order and mode of production, namely socialism, would emerge.”(p22) But what is the reason for this dogmatism? It is because Marx and Engels could not necessarily anticipate the reasons why it would become increasingly difficult to promote the successful realisation of socialism. For example, the reactionary role of Stalinism, which was actually an expression of a process of degeneration of what had been an authentic expression of proletarian revolution. The point being made is that the complexity of the politics of the 20th century could not have been anticipated by Marx and Engels. Nor could they have developed an analysis that was able to explain the increasingly ineffectiveness of various forms of revolutionary politics. But primarily they could not have been able to understand the reasons why the very development of capitalism undermined the possibility to increase the influence of socialist politics. Firstly the very success of reformism seemed to have undermined the credibility of the revolutionary approach, and then the offensive of capital against labour in the recent period seems to have overcome the ability of the working class to be able to strive in an effective manner to achieve an alternative type of society.

However, in a general manner it could be argued that Marx does outline the basis of an understanding of these complexities because he is aware that the economic strength of the workers is not sufficient for the realisation of its class objectives. Instead it is necessary to also organise in political terms: “But it is worth emphasizing that, for Marx, the working class is not truly a class unless it acquires the capacity to organize itself politically. In so far as this involves will and consciousness, as it obviously does, it can be said that there is in Marx a ‘subjective’ dimension to the notion of the working class as a class, as well as an ‘objective’ determination of it. The point may be summarized by saying that, without consciousness, the working class is a mere mass: it becomes a class when it acquires consciousness.” (p24) But this development is complex. Primarily it is difficult to define which political organisation is most adequately and effectively able to express the most principled characterisation of the consciousness of the working class. In this context it could be argued that revolutionary organisations are problematical because they are often indifferent to the realisation of improvements for the workers that can be made within the limitations of the capitalist system. Therefore, revolutionary parties only become popular when they accept the necessity to strive for the realisation of the progress of the workers within the capitalist system. But this very development could create problems in relation to the successful realisation of the aim of socialism. This is why reformist parties have never been able to adequately also strive to realise socialism. Instead they have preferred to accommodate themselves to making progress within the capitalist system. Success in this context has led to the effective rejection of revolutionary change. However, it could be argued that in this present period of the apparently unquestioned domination of capital it would seem that both the revolutionary and reformist strategies of the working class have been undermined. The result is a political crisis for the forces of labour. Marxism has been unable to address this situation in an effective manner by elaborating a convincing programme of social change. So, what has occurred is a crisis of Marxism which it is unable to resolve because of its increasing weakness and failure to relate to the aspirations of the working class. Instead the workers seem to have accepted the domination of capital as an inevitability. The response of Marxism is to implicitly accept a pessimistic approach or alternatively to uphold revolutionary perspectives in an unrealistic manner.

Miliband assumes that class conflict and class struggle is a regular aspect of the character of capitalist society. The implicit assumption is that this situation creates a constant possibility of the revolutionary transformation of capitalism into the realisation of a socialist alternative. But this perspective has proved to have become increasingly inaccurate since the 1980’s. Instead the apparent offensive of capital against labour has raised questions about the apparent revolutionary potential of the workers to be able to transform society. This situation is connected to the various limitations of the Marxist groups that are unable to relate to the aspirations of the workers in a convincing manner. It would seem that despite the limitations of capitalism it has become a system that is not possible to be transformed in a revolutionary manner by the role of mass action. It has been argued by some commentators that the effective social agency of change is no longer the workers but is instead the various activists. But the problem with this perspective is that it ignores the single issue and limited character of these campaigns. Hence it would seem that in general terms the capitalist system is no longer being undermined by the role of effective popular opposition. Furthermore, the ideological influence of nationalism seems to have become an effective alternative to the approach of international socialism. Therefore, when Miliband indicates that the issue of the genuine class consciousness of the workers is connected to an understanding of its ‘true interests’ we have to understand that this very aspect is complicated by the fact that the very success of the capitalist system in ensuring its continuation has led to a decline in support for a socialist alternative by the workers. The result of this situation means that it is difficult to establish whether a class that seems to have accepted its subordination to the interests of an antagonistic class is able to realise its ‘true interests’ in terms of supporting the aim of the overthrow of an economic system that can still be defined in terms of the exploitation and domination of this subordinate class. Hence the problem for Marxists is that for various reasons the major problem is that the working class seems to have accepted the situation of its domination by the forces of capital. This development is reinforced by the popularity of various political parties that support the continuation of the capitalist system. Therefore, how is this situation to become transformed so that the workers become critical of the present social formation and so become prepared to support the aim of opposing the domination of capital? Miliband suggests that the answer of Marx to this question is that the workers are capable because of their social location within capitalism of developing a revolutionary consciousness that aspires to the transformation of society in order to realise the objective of an end to the situation of the exploitation associated with capitalism: “In the Marxist perspective, proletarian class consciousness may be taken to mean the achievement of an understanding that the emancipation of the proletariat and the liberation of society require the overthrow of capitalism, and this understanding may also be taken to entail the will to overthrow it. It is in this sense that proletarian class consciousness is also revolutionary consciousness.”(p35) However it could be suggested that Marx and Engels underestimated the difficulties involved in the development of this revolutionary consciousness, and they did not sufficiently explain the ability of the defenders of capitalism to develop policies that would undermine the possibility to realise this potential for the revolutionary transformation of society. In this context Marx was able to point to the example of the Paris Commune in order to explain the possibility of mass action in relation to the prospect of the transformation of society in an emancipatory manner. But even Engels was aware of the problem of the role of popular nationalism in providing ideological justification for the capitalist system and so undermining the influence of the internationalist character of genuine class consciousness. Hence Engels was able to recognise the complexities involved in relation to the task of revolutionary change which Marx was generally not aware of. The increasing development of the limitations of the movement for socialism only contributed to an understanding of the difficulties involved in relation to the task of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. It could be argued that the very problems associated with the various socialist parties ultimately contributed to the continuation of the capitalist system and the inability to achieve the successful realisation of socialism. In this context the dependency of the working class on the role of the mass socialist party ultimately proved to be a problem because these very organisations became important defenders of capitalism and opposed to the aim of revolutionary change. However, the working class without the supporting role of the party proved unable to overcome the domination of capitalism. Miliband suggests that it has been the working class which could be said to have voluntarily chosen this perspective of the reform of capitalist society instead of the objective of revolutionary change. But this development is because the various Marxist organisations of the workers have increasingly adopted this reformist approach. It has been the primary importance of the role of the party which has defined the objectives of the workers. The ultimate result of this situation is that the socialist party has become an important defender of the capitalist system. In this context it would seem that the workers have no other option than to continue to support their political organisations. Therefore, the very character of political developments and the related influence of the reformist role of socialist type parties would seem to undermine the Marxist emphasis on the importance of the revolutionary character of the working class. Empirical developments seem to have undermined the validity of the perspectives of Marx concerning the revolutionary potential of the working class.

In theoretical terms Marx outlined a conception of the revolutionary character of the proletariat: “But even in these early formulations, there is in Marx and Engels a concept of the proletariat destined to become a revolutionary class because revolution is its only means of deliverance from the oppression and, exploitation and alienation which existing society imposes on it. These features of existing society are inherent to it, an intrinsic part of this social order, and can only be got rid of by the disappearance of the social order itself. From this point of view, the proletariat’s role is not determined by any extra-historical agency: it is determined by the nature of capitalism and by the concrete conditions which it imposes on the working class and upon society at large.”(p40-41) However the primary problem with this perspective is that it underestimates the complexity of economic and political developments which can act to undermine the possible successful realisation of the overthrow of capitalism by the workers. For example the development of world war has led to the serious weakening of the parties committed to socialism because a nationalism connected to the interests of capitalism has become more important than the realisation of the objective of the overthrow of the present system. Furthermore, the capitalist class has been able to promote the introduction of economic policies that have led to the decreased influence of the workers within society. But primarily the important of the role of the genuine Marxist parties has been in a situation of serious decline. The result has been that discontent within society has not led to a connected development of the increased influence of the objectives of socialism and Marxism. Instead activism has led to the aspiration to reject various policies of pro bourgeois governments rather than the promotion of the objective to undermine the continuation of the capitalist system. In this context many workers have become de-politicised and so the only force for political change is related to the role of activist campaigning. These developments mean that the possibility of the realisation of socialism as the alternative to capitalism has become an increasingly remote possibility.

Miliband attempts to address these issues by suggesting that the struggle to achieve reforms within capitalism can result in the possible generation of revolutionary consciousness of the workers. He outlines how Marx suggested that the realisation of the ten-hour day in Britain was an aspect of the possible development of a political economy based on an alternative logic to that of capitalism. Therefore: “Marxists have always believed that the working class would want to go beyond partial reforms inside the system – that it would, in other words, come to acquire the ‘class consciousness’ needed to want a throughgoing, revolutionary transformation of capitalist society into an entirely differently based and differently motivated system.”(p42) But this perspective has not been realised and Miliband’s justification of what he considers to be Marx’s approach is based on an underestimation of the difficulties involved in the attempt to realise socialism by the activity of the workers. Miliband accepts that it there are important difficulties involved in the realisation of this perspective but he ultimately underestimates the significance of these aspects and instead confidently and possibly complacently affirms that: But it may be said at this stage that a strict reading of the record, both of capitalism and of the working class, suggests that the expectation of a growing development in the working class (and in other large segments of the ‘collective labourer’) of a will far radical change is not in the least unreasonable or ‘metaphysical’ “(p43) These criticisms of the perspective of Miliband is not meant to deny the feasibility of the revolutionary transformation of society by the working class but instead to suggest that this possibility is more complex than the views outlined. The point is that Miliband was writing in the aftermath of the revolutionary developments in Portugal, and so it was reasonable to suggest an element of confidence in the possibility of the realisation of socialism. But since the publication of his book there has been a period of a generalised offensive of capital against labour which has raised complex issues about the possibility of the realisation of an alternative to the domination of the present economic system. However, it also has to be suggested that generally the major ideology within the working class has been that of reformism and the related view that the most important political aim should be the modification rather than the revolutionary transformation of the system. In this context the influence of Marxism became increasingly marginalised within Western Europe and the French and Italian communist parties adopted a reformist approach. Furthermore, the influence of the radical alternative of Trotskyism was not very important. Instead the general approach of the working class was based on support for reformism. It would seem that the influence of revolutionary Marxism was of a secondary character. But Miliband seems reluctant to systematically discuss the importance of these developments, and so his approach is generally of an abstract character and seems to have little relationship to actual events.

This criticism does not mean that Miliband is unaware of various limitations in the Marxist understanding of class consciousness. He knows that the approach of Marx and Engels is not sufficient in order to define the character of the role of the consciousness of the workers. But what he does not consider is that the very approach of Marx and Engels may be problematical in relation to this issue of the views of the workers. The point is that Marx assumed that the working class would become revolutionary because of the very importance of the aspect of exploitation within the relations of production. This meant that he did not consider the manner in which the very importance of the economic system could generate a situation of the subservience of labour to the interests of capital. The fact is that the very continuation and apparent stability of the role of capitalism seemed to suggest that this economic system could not be overcome by the revolutionary actions of the workers. Hence it was vital that a revolutionary party became influential in order to promote the influence of an alternative to capitalism. This meant the development of an effective challenge to the dominant view that capitalism was a system that could not be challenged and replaced with an alternative type of economic and political system. Hence it was the development of Marxism that led to the most effective challenge to the standpoint that capitalism could not be altered and replaced with a different and more emancipatory system. But the fact that the forces of Marxism went into various situations of political crisis increasingly discredited the view that an alternative to capitalism was possible. It was the very limitations of Marxism that facilitated the increasing influence of the standpoint that the capitalist system was stable and dominant in terms of being able to effectively oppose the realisation of alternatives. The initial period of the Bolshevik revolution challenged the ideological hegemony of the forces of capital but the degeneration of this development into the ascendency of Stalinism led to the renewal of the view that capitalism was a superior and essentially dominant system. Only the situation of world war caused by inter-imperialist conflict seemed to challenge the influence of this assumption. But the overthrow of capitalism by Stalinism was not an expression of genuine proletarian revolution and instead was about enhancing the influence and prestige of a reactionary social formation. The only alternative to Stalinism seemed to be the role of moderate social democracy, or the acceptance of the continued importance of capitalism in a modified form of the welfare state. In this situation the role of revolutionary Marxism was marginalised. The result of this situation meant that it was extremely difficult to try and generate the development of revolutionary class consciousness. Events in France in 1968 and Portugal in 1974 seems to have contradicted this analysis, but even this mass unrest did not result in revolutionary change because spontaneous discontent was not able to facilitate the overthrow of the domination of capitalism. Hence the failure to create effective revolutionary parties and the connected marginalisation of genuine Marxism meant that the possibility to generate genuine class consciousness was extremely difficult. After the 1980’s the recession politics of various regimes only undermined the strength and influence of the working class and raised new questions about the feasibility of the realisation of the socialist alternative. In this context the general consciousness of the workers seemed to be based on an acceptance of capitalism not because of genuine support for this system but instead as a result of the fact that an alternative did not seem to be a feasible possibility. The forces of capital seemed to have achieved a definitive victory in the class struggle and as a result the working class was weakened and apparently unable to advance the realisation of the aim of the achievement of an alternative to the present system. In this context the forces of Marxism increasingly emphasised the importance of various forms of activist actions, but they were unable to explain how these could contribute to the overcoming of the domination of capital. The overall problem was that these struggles consisted of the role of a minority of activists and the working class in general seemed to have accepted the domination of capitalism. The result was a decrease in the level of class consciousness and the related marginalisation of the many competing and small Marxist groups.

In other words, the issue of the development of a genuine revolutionary class consciousness seems to have been a difficult task that was not resolved in a progressive manner. But the basis of this problem was the influence of Social Democracy and Stalinism which promoted various forms of adaptation to the interests of capital and rejection of any genuine attempt to develop revolutionary politics. Ultimately the influence of these political forces declined and instead the ascendency of various parties that supported the capitalist system was realised in an effective and increasingly unchallenged manner. In this context the influence of any type of revolutionary Marxism was marginalised and the apparent radical alternative of various types of activism did not challenge the dominance of the capitalist system. Hence it was extremely difficult to facilitate the development of the influence of genuine Marxism in this situation and as a result the possibility to facilitate a revolutionary consciousness within the working class became almost an impossible task. In this context it seemed that the forces supporting capitalism had achieved a decisive victory in terms of the establishment of the durability of the system and the apparent inability to oppose its domination in an effective manner. Miliband suggests that a major reason for the durability of capitalism is that is an economic system that is able to mystify the exploitative character of its economic relations and instead ideologically promote the view that this system is efficient and in the general interests of the people. But Marx also believed that the character of capitalism creates a cooperative working class that is capable and increasingly willing to unite and struggle to oppose the economic priorities of the system. Hence Miliband suggests that there is a tension between the role of tradition and the actuality of the possibility for the cooperative organisation of the working class in opposition to the system. Miliband indicates that the very character of capitalism is based on the importance of a division of labour within the relations of production that seems to justify the hierarchical domination of capital over the working class. The very functioning of the economic system seems to imply that it cannot be transformed and replaced with an emancipatory alternative. However, it is also important to emphasise that the influence of this aspect is connected to developments in the class struggle. Successful militant struggles of the workers imply that alternative possibilities are developing which suggest that the overcoming of the domination of capital has become possible. But the defeats of the workers also imply that the continuation of capital has become an aspect of social reality that cannot be questioned. Miliband does not discuss this issue in detail because his book was written before the events of the 1980’s. However, the importance of the offensive of capital against labour since this period has raised serious questions about the ability of the workers to organise in an effective manner to oppose the priorities of the forces of capital. In other words Miliband is still able to outline the possibilities of the advance of the interests of the working class because his book is written in terms of the period when the welfare state was still an aspect of social reality and so the influence of the workers can be understood to be an important aspect of the character of the economic system of capitalism in terms of the role of the welfare state. But the very economic and political offensive of right-wing governments has raised serious questions about the ability of the workers to be able to change society in terms of the realisation of their interests. Instead it would seem that a section of the workers has adapted to the influence of bourgeois ideology and so accepted the continuation of capitalism.

Therefore, it seems to be an optimistic view of Miliband to consider that the character of ideology is a contested aspect of social reality. He comments: “At any rate, the discussion of hegemony and class consciousness more than ever requires the inclusion of the concept of a battle being fought on many different fronts and on the basis of the tensions and contradictions which are present in the actual structures of work and of life in general in capitalism as a social formation. The manifestations of that battle are endlessly diverse; but the fact is that it does occur. The ideological terrain is by no means wholly occupied by ‘the ideas of the ruling class’: it is highly contested territory.”(p56) But the problem with this standpoint is that it has become to be considered to be a very optimistic view given the increasing influence of the ideology of the ruling class caused by the success of the offensive of the interests of capital against those of the working class in the recent period. Hence it has become politically difficult to promote and develop the influence of an ideology opposed to capital in these difficult circumstances. In contrast Miliband was writing in a period when the apparent development of the militancy of the working class was a general feature of many countries. However, the weakening of the influence of the workers within society has led to the decline of the popularity of the ideology of socialism and instead various ideas promoting the durability of capitalism have become influential. Miliband contends that the ideology of tradition and change are in constant struggle in relation to becoming the most dominant expression of the aims of the working class, but what has happened in the recent period is that the very concept of change has become connected to the interests of capital. The approach of tradition has become connected to the aspirations of the workers to oppose the various changes being proposed by the parties of the ruling class. Hence the aim of socialism has become connected to the standpoint of a type of conservatism, but the problem is that this approach seems to be anachronistic when compared to the apparent dynamism being promoted by the ideologues of capital. The aspect of modernity seems to be promoted by the supporters of capitalism and in contrast the objective of socialism becomes ridiculed as a justification of opposition to progress. In this context it no longer seems to be possible to promote the objective of socialism as a dynamic alternative to capitalism. Indeed, socialism becomes marginalised and considered to be the nostalgic aim of intellectuals who refuse to accept the apparent logic of modernity and its consolidation of the domination of capital. But this very aspect means that the aim of socialism no longer has credibility and so the task is to re-elaborate this objective so that it can be made compatible with the dynamics of modernity. However, recognition of the importance of this task has led many social democratic politicians to reject socialism as an antiquated objective and that instead the objective has to become justification of a process of accommodation to capitalism. In this context the approach of Marxism seems to have become discredited because its adherents seem to be content to uphold its apparent dogmatic truths and so refuse to develop a standpoint that is able to relate to the developments of the recent period. But what is an effective crisis of Marxism means that the working class no longer seems to have a credible ideological alternative to capitalism. The antiquated nature of Miliband’s analysis is that he is unable to anticipate the extent and seriousness of this political situation and instead is content to defend the apparent truths of Marxism about the character of the class struggle and class consciousness.

In this context he is content to suggest that the role of ideology is contested between the rival approaches of the working class and ruling class: “At any rate, the discussion of hegemony and class consciousness more than ever requires the inclusion of a battle being fought on many different fronts and on the basis of the tensions and contradictions which are present in the actual structures or work and of life in general in capitalism as a social formation. The manifestations of that battle are endlessly diverse; but the fact is that it does occur. The ideological terrain is by no means wholly occupied by ‘the ideas of the ruling class’: it is highly contested territory.”(p56) But even if we generally accept the validity of this comment for the period when Miliband was writing his book, it has become an antiquated conclusion since then. The success of the forces of capital in the class struggle has led to a general decline in class consciousness that has raised serious questions about the ability of the workers to be able to change society. Indeed, it would seem that despite the various limitations of the present economic system it has become dominant in many different respects and so the issue of the process of transformation is seriously questioned. The issue of the development of class consciousness of the workers has become a more complex issue than could have been anticipated by Miliband.

The point being made is that the effective offensive of the interests of capital against labour has raised questions about the possibility of revolutionary change. It would seem that the prospects of the transformation of society has been undermined by the apparent ability of the capitalist class to enhance its economic power and so weaken the importance of the workers. The result of this development is the apparent undermining of the influence of class consciousness and instead people have accepted the domination of capital as an unalterable aspect that cannot be overcome. This is why the various expressions of discontent in the present period do not challenge the supremacy of capital but instead relate to other aspects of society such as the foreign policy of governments or the issue of ecology. It has often been suggested that these developments are an indication of the lessening of the importance of the role of industrial labour within the economy. This viewpoint is debateable. It would be more relevant to suggest that what is the problem is the decline of the connection between the role of a revolutionary party and the working class. In the period since the second world war the opportunist regression of the various communist parties combined with the reformist practice of the forces of social democracy has meant that there has not been a genuine and popular expression of the role of a revolutionary party. This has meant the discontent of the working class at various periods of history has often not been expressed by definite political expression. The result of this situation has meant that the potential of spontaneous opposition to capitalism has not acquired definite political expression in terms of the realisation of the leadership of a revolutionary party with the advocacy of a principled strategy for change. Miliband discusses the problem of elitism if the party assumes that it can act on behalf of the workers without being limited by a situation of democratic accountability between party and class, but what he does not discuss is the increasingly relevant issue of the consequences of the failure to create a revolutionary organisation with the genuine support of the workers. He does outline the increasing opportunist limitations of the parties of the Second International tradition and also the accommodation of the Third International under Stalinist leadership to an acceptance of capitalism and the limitations imposed by bourgeois democracy. His alternative is to advocate the formation of revolutionary parties that would strive to promote the aim of the realisation of popular democracy by the organisations of the working class, like the trade unions, which would create the conditions for the revolutionary transformation of society. But what is not explained is how the influence of bourgeois ideology and reformism within the working class can be challenged so that it becomes a conscious supporter of the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society. There is no outline of the process by which the development of revolutionary consciousness can be achieved in the working class. Indeed instead of an emphasis on the importance of the dynamic possibilities of the development of revolutionary consciousness of the working class, Miliband instead emphasises the importance of the formation of a revolutionary government for generating the conditions that will make possible the transition to socialism: “in this perspective, a ‘reformist’ strategy, if it is taken seriously and pursued to its necessary conclusion, must lead to a vast extension of democratic participation in all areas of civic life – amounting to a very considerable transformation of the character of the state and of existing bourgeois democratic forms. If this be so, it turns out that the reformist strategy ultimately involves the acknowledgment of the truth of the proposition of Marx and Engels that the ‘working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready- made state machinery, and wield it for its own purpose’”(p196) But this strategy of change is not connected to any convincing understanding of how to develop the motivation and confidence of the working class to oppose capitalism in terms of the elected creation of what is a revolutionary government. This development has never occurred apart from one or two exceptional situations, and Miliband does not explain how the influence of bourgeois ideology can be challenged so that the workers become motivated to act in the manner he outlines. Hence his approach is ultimately limited because he does not elaborate a convincing understanding of how the workers can develop a revolutionary class consciousness and so become motivated to act in a manner that undermines the domination of capital and so facilitates a process of transformation to socialism.

The problem is that this failure to outline a convincing argument in favour of the possibility of the development of a revolutionary consciousness of the working class facilitated the increasing influence of a pessimistic approach that rejected this possibility in the period of the apparent domination of capital that has occurred in recent times. As Leo Panitch explains: “All of this pertains directly to the view that the root of the inability to develop a sustained and creative socialist practice lies in false assumptions about the revolutionary potential of the working class. Having been for so long seen as the fount of the realization of socialism a political practice that grounds itself centrally in the working class came to be seen by many people on the left in the last decades of the twentieth century as the obstacle to fundamental transformation. There are really two versions to this by now quite common theme. The first focused on the sociological decomposition of the old industrial working class in occupational, residential and cultural terms, and discerned in this the roots of ‘the forward march of labour halted’. Out of this analysis came a renewed call, in the face of bourgeois revolution from above in the 1980’s to revive something akin to the popular front strategy of the 1930’s, targeting electoral alliance between the elites of the weakened traditional political and industrial institutions of the working class with whatever bourgeois elites could be weaned away from the barbarism of Thatcherism or Reaganism towards renewal of the politics of compromise. The second version went beyond the first by challenging the notion of a distinct working class ‘interest’ in socialism, or indeed in anything else. Strategically, it was less concerned with alliances among elites, but taking its cue from the relative vitality of new social movements, it looked to an ‘articulation’ of diverse social groups, with the emphasis placed less of traditional socialist solutions and more on completing the unfinished business of the liberal democratic revolution begun in 1789. Although the two consistently intertwined, the first version inflected back towards democratic state interventionism and tripartite corporatism; the second version inflected towards strengthening a rather loosely defined ‘civil society’ against the state and capital.”(Leo Panitch: Renewing Socialism, Merlyn Press, Pontypool 2008 p26)

But the point is that this emphasis on the importance of a modification of what could be considered to be the strategy of the realisation of socialism did not effectively address the issue of the problem of how to develop the consciousness of the working class in order to become genuine supporters of the aim of socialism. Instead the emphasis on strategy was the very justification of evasion in relation to this important question. What was not consistently and effectively discussed was how to challenge the successful emphasis on the importance of nation in the approach of the parties of the ruling class. This aspect was able to undermine the alternative importance of class as the basis of politics. But the success of the appeal to the importance of nation was used to discredit the alternative of the aspiration for socialism. The relation of socialism to the role of the working class was actually rejected because the nation was considered to be more important. Indeed, this situation often resulted in the degeneration of various socialist types parties into accepting the claims of nation and failing to oppose the offensive of capital against labour that this was connected to. The right-wing trajectory of various socialist type parties was important because of the role that these organisations had established in the promotion of the aspiration of socialism within the working class. Indeed as Panitch indicates the role of socialist parties has been crucial in the possible development of a consciousness within the working class in favour of the aim of socialism: “But once we accept the idea that capitalism does not of itself self-destruct, and that homogenous working class identity is neither possible nor even desirable then the work that parties do in the formation of the identity of the working class becomes the critical variable in the realization of socialism. The question becomes whether such parties, as they emerge out of the limited degree and form of working class identity and solidarity that develops spontaneously and through trade union organization within capitalism, can transform that identity and solidarity into a force that realize the possibility of socialist revolution.”(p26-27) But the problem is that for various reasons the political organisations with a socialist doctrine have proved to be inadequate in relation to the realisation of the task of attaining socialism and so overcoming the domination of capitalism. For various reasons they have rejected the importance of achieving the conscious mobilisation of the workers in favour of the realisation of the overthrow of the domination of capitalism and so achieving a socialist alternative. However, the dilemma for the workers is that they are not able to establish alternative and more principled political organisations that would be more effective in the struggle to achieve socialism. Instead the constant problem is the influence of political organisations that ultimately oppose the possibility to achieve socialism. This situation can only result in the disorientation of the workers and so undermine even more the possibility of the attainment of an alternative to capitalism. Instead the workers have had to accept that their political organisations have become based on an acceptance of the present system and have rejected the necessity of striving to achieve an alternative. This situation has led to the formation of alternative and more principled socialist organisations, but they have tended to be without popular support. The result of this development is that the situation seems to be based on an acceptance of the necessity of capitalism and the promotion of reforms rather than changing the system. But even this perspective has been undermined by the onset of the period of austerity when the various political organisations of the working class have had to reject the policy of reforms and instead accept the necessity of measures that undermine the social conditions of the working class. Such a development has resulted in political crisis for the organisations of the working class, but a valid political alternative based on the promotion of socialism has not been created. Instead hopes for progressive change has become based on the role of the new social movements but they lack political credibility and cannot become the basis of an alternative government to the various parties supporting the interests of capital. Hence there is an ideological crisis because it seems no longer possible to generate a form of class consciousness that is able to sustain and promote effective socialist politics. Therefore, the major question becomes how to regenerate class consciousness so that it can become translated in effective political terms of the renewal of an effective type of socialist politics. Panitch outlines this task in the following terms: “Popular support, in the form of votes for parties committed to social change is essential; but such expression of support at the polls can never be enough. What is required is the penetration of socialist ideas and creative organizational and intellectual capacities throughout society.” (p40) But this approach does not indicate how the credibility of socialism is to be established given the apparent hegemony of bourgeois ideology? Surely the important task is to outline a perspective of socialist change that can appeal to the contemporary working class. In this context it is necessary to outline that the limitations of capitalism can be overcome by socialism that is based on the dynamism of working people. Thus, it is necessary to try and outline and develop a conception of socialism that can facilitate the possible realisation of popular support for this perspective. Hence, we also have to establish why the previous promotion of socialism has often resulted in failure. This situation means that there is an important dilemma the capitalist system will continue not because of genuine support for it, but instead as a result of the apparent fact that people do not consider that there is an alternative to its continuation. Hence the task of socialists is to develop and elaborate a conception of socialism that can seem to be more feasible and possible. Only by the creation of this possible support for a renewed understanding of socialism will it be possible to transform class consciousness into a revolutionary consciousness or the willingness of a struggle for change. The failure to achieve success in this regard must mean that there are important limitations in the manner in which the aim of socialism has been presented. Hence it is to this task that we have to address and try to develop a more effective and plausible conception of socialism and of how to realise this objective.

Ralph Miliband develops this understanding in his book: “Socialism for a Sceptical Age” (Polity Press, Cambridge 1994) Miliband is aware that if people are to become motivated to oppose capitalism it is necessary to try and convince them of the credibility and necessity of an alternative in terms of the possible superiority of socialism to the present system. He is aware that the recent period of history has raised serious questions about the possibility of the realisation of socialism: “If socialism is indeed taken to be a far distant prospect, or a proven illusion, why not concentrate on the struggle for such advances as can be achieved, and forget an idea, a vision, a utopia which is now widely discredited, and is not possible, even likely, that these advances will in time further transform capitalism in the desired direction? More generally are we not now at a remarkable period in history where capitalism has so changed, and has thereby so changed the perspectives and expectations of people, that the notion of a socialist alternative is an increasingly irrelevant eccentricity?”(p9) This comment indicates that the consciousness of the people, because of important social changes, may no longer be receptive to the aspiration for the realisation of socialism. But unfortunately, Miliband does not seem concerned to elaborate this point and instead emphasises that capitalism has important limitations which make socialism a feasible alternative. This may be a valid point, but it does not explain the fact that despite the problems with the present economic system the majority of the workers seem prepared to support its continuation. It is important to tackle the issue of the hegemony or ideological domination of the standpoint of capitalism if the issue of the development of a popular consciousness in favour of revolutionary change is to become a feasible possibility. The point is that even in the present period of austerity the majority of people cannot envisage an alternative to the dominant economic system. In other words, the character of consciousness of the people is based on an acceptance of the continuation of capitalism and the issue of an alternative seems to be an irrelevant prospect. This is not to suggest that people are not aware of various limitations of the present system such as the continuation of inequality and poverty, but the issue of a socialist alternative seems to be an impractical irrelevancy. The various Marxist parties advocate the development of struggle in order to create a dynamic in which socialism becomes a feasible possibility, but the very low level of class consciousness means that increasingly development of mass struggle with the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society does not occur. Instead people accept the continuation of capitalism despite the expression of discontent. The point is that people are not necessarily content with the system but they cannot envisage a superior alternative that is able to realise a superior level of material wealth and which would enable them to become the definite expression of the ability to define the aims and objectives of the economy and political system. In other words, the apparent feasibility of an alternative to the present capitalist system is essentially rejected by people as being unrealistic. Therefore, even when people express discontent with the system they reject the perspective that they should strive to realise an alternative system. But even the aspect of mass struggle to achieve gains within capitalism has become discredited by the onset of austerity. It seems that the only option is accept what is possible within the system. In this context the very perspective of militant struggle to achieve limited concessions from the system has become problematical. In this context discontent with the system becomes expressed in reactionary terms of the increased influence of popular nationalism as in relation to the BREXIT vote with regards to the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU. Furthermore, the various Marxist organisations remain small and without influence. There are still some forms of activism, but this is increasingly limited to what is possible within the present system.

The aspect of actual reality which do not generate the development of class struggle contradict the implications of Miliband’s understanding of social reality which is based on the inability of capitalism to realise the economic and social aspirations of the people because it is a system based on exploitation and the generation of inequality: “Even so, the fatal flaw in capitalism’s immense productive capacity is that it is unable to ensure the beneficent use of the resources which it has generated and continued to generate. The discrepancy between the promise which the development of the forces of production holds and the daily reality which wag-earners confront remains fundamental. Capitalism has created for humankind, for the first time ever, the possibility of assuring minimally, a materially secure and morally decent life for all inhabitants of the planet; but is incapable of turning this marvellous promise into reality.”(p12) This may be a accurate comment about the situation created by the limitations of capitalism but the point is that this does not result in the automatic development of opposition to the present system. Instead despite the aspects of inequality and exploitation the consciousness of the workers does not become revolutionary and based on opposition to the system. The major problem is that people do no consider socialism to be a credible alternative to the domination of capitalism and this viewpoint has only been strengthened by the limitations of Stalinism. Miliband outlines how capitalism has not overcome the problems of inequality and poverty, but the problem is that he is not able to connect this understanding to the possibility of the mobilisation of the people for opposition to capitalism. Instead it could be argued that generally people accept these aspects as being unavoidable and part of social reality, and the lack of a popular socialist alternative means that the ideology of support for the capitalist system is not contested. Ultimately the problem is always about the inability to develop revolutionary class consciousness in the working class despite the various limitations of capitalism. Miliband is aware that the capitalist system has been unable to overcome inequality and its connected problems, but the very possibility to continue to generate this aspect of economic actuality is because people generally accept that this is an inherent aspect of the present social system. The point is that people cannot envisage an alternative to capitalism because of the lack of support for the socialist alternative.

However, Miliband seems to underestimate the importance of this apparent acceptance of the capitalist system by the majority of the people because he contends that the situation is characterised by the expression of the importance of class struggle: “It is worth dwelling on this, because politics is largely constituted by the permanent struggle, now more acute, now more less, between dominant and subordinate classes…..there is a pattern, determined on the one hand by pressure and struggle from below against various forms of domination, discrimination, exclusion and enhanced exploitation, and on the other by struggle from above for the maintenance of the social order of which these features are an intrinsic part.”(p23) It could be argued that this is an aspect of the present situation but the point is that it is not necessarily important or of primary significance. Instead what seems to be characteristic is that the majority of people essentially accept the continuation of capitalism and do not generally engage in militant activity that represents a type of opposition. But Miliband does not accept this conclusion and seems to underestimate the importance of the apparent accommodation of the majority of the people to the continuation of capitalism: “Class societies cannot overcome this struggle….it has proved possible for these societies to achieve a routinization of conflict, meaning the accommodation of subordinate classes to their location in the social order, at the price of certain (often significant) concessions. But such routinization is not stable, and even where it endures, and acute conflict is avoided it is impossible for such societies to achieve real harmony, and to become communities in reality as well as rhetoric.”(p23-24) However this conclusion would seem to be dogmatic and not a realistic description of the general character of the social situation. Instead, apart from exceptional political periods, the working class seems to have accepted the domination of capitalism and so has not developed an effective opposition to the system. Only when the influence of left-wing political organisations has been important has the general situation become defined by the expression of an aspiration for a definite challenge to the authority of the capitalist system. But the increasing right-wing trajectory of the parties of the working class has undermined the very ability of the people to oppose capitalism. This aspect is connected to the failure to develop new and effective revolutionary parties able to promote the aim of socialism in an effective manner. It could be argued that this situation is as a result of the fact that workers do not generally support the objectives of revolutionary organisations. This point may often have general validity, but the sectarian basis of these groups means that they frequently lack the credibility to express and represent the interests of the workers. The very limitations of class consciousness are connected to this problem concerning the creation of credible revolutionary parties. Hence an aspect of the problems related to the development of a revolutionary viewpoint within the working class is actually an expression of a situation of effective crisis in relation to the development of a genuine and popular revolutionary party. Instead the result of this situation is that the workers seem to have no alternative than to support either reformist or establishment parties. Therefore, in this manner the very limitations of the political situation result in the acceptance of capitalism by the working class. It could be argued that the workers are generally not receptive to the objectives of revolutionary organisations, but this apparent indifference is facilitated by the apparent divisions between the different groups. The formation of a united party could promote the possibility to resolve this issue in a constructive manner. Such a development would not immediately and automatically generate the realisation of the possibility of the realisation of a revolutionary consciousness within the working class, but at least this prospect would have been advanced. However, the various left-wing groups seem to have upheld their interests in a sectarian manner that has undermined the possibility to establish a genuine connection between the working class and revolutionary Marxism. In this context the workers have limited political options, and so it could be argued that the crisis of the role of the revolutionary party is also a crisis for the working class. It could be argued that this is a dogmatic view that ignores the fact that the working class has generally accepted the system. This point may be valid, but it has been connected to the ability to achieve the realisation of reformist governments that have been able to achieve various reforms in the interests of the working class. Progress within the system has undermined the apparent credibility of the revolutionary perspective. But the onset of the period of the offensive of capital against labour since the 1980’s has undermined the credibility of this approach. However, the influence of revolutionary Marxism has not been developed as a result of this situation, and instead there has been a general political crisis for the working class which has led to the increased influence of right-wing populism. Therefore, the class consciousness of the workers has not been generated in this period and this situation is connected to the success of the offensive of capital against labour. The problem with the analysis of Miliband is that he does not seem to have recognised the importance of the potential role of a Marxist party in the promotion of the influence of revolutionary class consciousness. Instead in a vague manner he assumes that the limitations of capitalism can promote the possibility to achieve a radicalisation of the working class. But he does not outline how this process will be realised, except in the vague terms of the role of a socialist government. But how is this possibility to be attained except in the context of the genuine influence of a political organisation with the aim of the socialist transformation of society? However, the problem is that these types of parties lack credibility and instead the situation is increasingly defined by the influence of various forms of populism. The situation is not favourable to genuine revolutionary change and instead the aspirations of the role of nation seem to have become more important than the aims of socialism. In this context there has been a regression in relation to the influence of the role of class, and the issue of class consciousness has become undermined by the apparent success of the forces of capital and conservatism to consolidate a situation of economic and political domination.

Miliband would connect this situation to the influence of ideology and the capacity of the ruling class to be able to obtain the domination of its interests in political terms. But the point is that this situation is because the ideology of the ruling groups has proved to be more convincing than the opposing standpoint of opposition to the system. This aspect is connected to the lack of support for the only principled alternative to capitalism which is socialism. Such a development is because the major reformist organisations no longer promote the aim of socialism and the various smaller Marxist groups fail to outline any convincing conceptions of this objective. Instead there is an assumption that the development of forms of class struggle will result in generating the possibility to realise socialism. But such a perspective is never confirmed by actual social practice and indeed the effective offensive of capital against labour in the recent period has undermined the very justification of the view that successful class struggle is possible that will result in socialism. In other words, there is a situation of the domination of bourgeois ideology which has undermined the apparent credibility of socialism and instead led to a resigned acceptance of the durability of capitalism. Furthermore, the importance of various economic changes seems to have undermined the importance of the role of labour within the economy, and so the prospect that the working class can bring about social change has become a discredited notion. However, this development is worsened by the failure of the Marxist groups to address the seriousness of this situation. Instead organisations like the Socialist Workers party find consolation in the view that the various activist groups, or the new social movements, have become a new and important agency of social change. This perspective is not outlined in any credible manner and instead it is asserted as a historical truth and the actual enhancement of the domination of capital over labour is conveniently ignored. What is not understood is that it is the very weakness of the forces of revolutionary Marxism which is most responsible for this present situation of the apparent omnipotent domination of the forces of capital. There is little support for the perspective of the socialist transformation of society. Miliband is aware of the importance of the influence of bourgeois ideology for undermining the generation of the influence of the socialist alternative, but he does not connect this aspect to the ideological importance of defeats for the workers in the class struggle. The point is that during the militant miner’s strike in the UK of 1984-85 the aim of socialism acquired some popular support as an alternative to the offensive of capital against labour. But the defeat of these types of militant activity only facilitated the consolidation of the domination of the ideology of the defenders of the capitalist system. The recent election of Jeremey Corbyn as leader of the labour party seemed to have led to a revival of the influence of the aim of socialism, but this very potential was apparently seriously defeated with the successful re-election of a populist Conservative government on the basis of an appeal to the importance of nation as opposed to that of class.

This development is not unique. It can be argued that at crucial moments in history the appeal of nation has seemed to be more important than that of class. For example the onset of the first world war led to the undermining of the cause of socialist internationalism and instead most Social Democratic parties in Europe rejected an approach of solidarity between the workers of the different nations in favour of support of the so-called national interest. Whilst in 1983 despite being a reactionary government that had created mass unemployment the Conservative government in the UK was able to be re-elected because of victory in the Falklands war, and the related generation of the influence of national chauvinism. In other words, in periods of political crisis the forces of reaction have been able to appeal to nationalism in order to undermine any possible development of the influence of internationalism and socialism. Only the Bolshevik revolution seems to have been an exception to this development. But ultimately the Soviet regime in the USSR degenerated by the justification of its own form of nationalism based on the theory of ‘socialism in one country’. It has not been possible in a consistent manner to promote a credible perspective of the successful development of the class struggle in terms of the aspects of internationalism and the aim of socialism. Instead in general terms the capitalist class has been able to maintain a situation of political and ideological domination based on the influence of nationalism and opposition of the connection of internationalism with the requirements of the class struggle. But the point is that this type of defence of capitalism has been made possible because the appeal of nationalism has been popular and has helped to justify the present system to the working class. However, this very development can only be credible because the apparent aim of socialism seems to be unrealistic when compared to the ‘obligation’ to the people of a given country to defend their nation state. Hence, we can suggest that nationalism has been possibly the most important reason why capitalism has a continued to be the dominant system. In contrast the internationalism associated with the objective of socialism is not understood in popular terms and so is unable to provide the basis of an alternative to the imperialism associated with the capitalist system. Indeed, it could be argued that there was a popular rejection of the apparent internationalism associated with the European Union by the people of the UK in the recent referendum on EU membership. In other words, it is not necessary for the defenders of capitalism to elaborate the supposed merits of this economic system because they can utilise an appeal to nationalism in order to generate support for the present type of society. But in contrast the approach of a socialist type of internationalism has little support and seems to be abstract when compared to the apparent relevance of the role of a national community. It could be argued that the undermining of the importance of internationalism in 1914 with the onset of the first world war is something that has never been overcome. Instead the appeal of nation overcomes any attempt to connect the aims of socialism and internationalism. Obviously, this aspect has not ended the role of class struggle, but this has generally been limited to various economic struggles carried out by the trade unions. There have also been popular protests against the various actions of national governments in relation to foreign policy. But these aspects have not led to the development of a popular connection between internationalism and socialism as the alternative to the imperialism of various national governments. Instead mass unrest has taken the form of protest, and this development has not led to the promotion of the role of class struggle and the intensification of the contradiction between capital and labour. In other words, even in these situations of political unrest the ideological hegemony of the capitalist system has not been called into question. None of this viewpoint is meant to deny the fact that at various times the economic struggles of the workers have represented a serious challenge to the objectives of the capitalist system. For example, the 1984-85 miners strike. But the problem was that such developments did not result in a general strike which could result in the possibility of a serious challenge to the domination of the present system. However, even when a general strike did occur as in 1926, the opportunist role of the leadership of the Trade Union Congress led to the promotion of a defeat of this dispute. Hence the problem for the prospect of the development of the success of the class struggle is the creation of the influence and importance of the role of a revolutionary party. But such a possibility has only occurred infrequently, and only in Russia did it result in a genuine revolutionary result. But then the very degeneration of the revolutionary party in Russia led to the creation of Stalinism which undermined the possibility to overthrow capitalism in international terms. In other words, the failures of the class struggle can primarily be connected to the problems involved in the creation of a genuinely principled and popular revolutionary party. However, the enduring isolation of the various Marxist parties is an indication that this situation is very complicated and cannot be resolved in a simple manner. All that can be suggested is that the inherent economic and political limitations of capitalism mean’s that the possibility to challenge the system has not been ended. There is not a definitive ‘end of history’, but nor can it be said that success in the class struggle is inevitable. Instead the character of social reality is complex and uncertain because capitalism is a limited and problematical system and yet the issue of the development of a revolutionary alternative is also not guaranteed. In this context class struggle still occurs but it cannot be said that the triumph of socialism is inevitable. Indeed, a serious question is raised by the fact that the development of genuine revolutionary parties is a serious issue that has not been successfully realised. Instead this objective has to be accomplished if the task of socialism is to become a genuine aspect of the political agenda.

Why has the realisation of this task proved to be difficult? Firstly, the various Social Democratic and Stalinist organisations have undergone a process of opportunist degeneration which has led them to effectively reject the aim of democratic socialism. Instead they have become concerned to dominate either a continuing form of capitalism or else have established a type of bureaucratic society. However the emergence of an alternative type of genuine revolutionary Marxism has proved to be difficult and so the result is that the political character of the politics of socialism has become essentially defined by the role of what are various types of reformist, opportunist or bureaucratic political organisations. In this context it has often proved to be a logical response for the working class to support various pro capitalist parties in order to express their interests. In contrast the alternative of revolutionary Marxism has not developed in an effective manner in terms of the generation of a genuine relation between party and class. These developments seem to indicate that Marx’s conception of the realisation of revolutionary consciousness by the working class has proved to be problematical. Marx’s approach is defined by Miliband in the following manner: “For him, and for later Marxists, social being was taken to be eminently shaped by class, and class itself was determined by location in the process of production. The location of the working class in that process entailed its subjection to domination and exploitation and this must in turn lead it to develop a ‘class consciousness’ infused with the will to achieve a different social system. This conception of social being and of its consequences has proved to be greatly flawed.” (p128) Miliband is right to suggest that this development of class consciousness is not necessarily the basis of the creation of a revolutionary standpoint. Instead the initial and possibly most important aspect is the understanding that change is possible within the system of capitalism and so the necessity for the transformation of society is not necessarily an expression of the interests of the workers. But we also have to recognise the importance of the influence of the dominant ideology of the capitalist system which constantly undermines the validity and importance of the perspective of socialist change. Furthermore, the various parties claiming to be an expression of the interests of the workers have often accommodated to the influence of bourgeois ideology and so have attempted to realise their political objectives within the system. In most circumstances the workers have been unable to oppose this development and so have had to accommodate to the role of reformism. Furthermore, the recent crisis of reformism has not led to support by the workers for revolutionary alternatives but instead enhanced the popularity of the various pro-capitalist organisations. The point is that there is an important development of the political crisis of the politics of change because of the increasing accommodation of reformist organisations to the interests of capitalism. But such a right-wing trajectory has generally not resulted in increasing support by the working class for revolutionary politics. There has been instead a general decline in the level of radicalisation of the workers since the period of the early 1900’s. In the early years of the 20th century the workers often supported radical syndicalist organisations which promoted the aim that transformation of society was possible by the collective action of trade unions committed to this perspective. But the very development of the Bolshevik revolution led to the generation of the influence of the view that a revolutionary party was required in order to promote the possibility of the transformation of society. But the degeneration of Bolshevism meant that this perspective became problematical and this result in a crisis of the credibility of revolutionary strategy. Only in the Spain of the mid 1930’s was the approach of syndicalism apparently successful in partial terms. The result of this profound political crisis of the perspectives of the working class was the re-emergence of the credibility of reformism, which seemed to be vindicated by the creation of the welfare state in the post-war period. It seemed that the working class could achieve some form of liberation with the election of reformist governments committed to the progressive modification of capitalism. But the onset of the neo-liberal offensive of the forces of reaction against the post-war gains of the working class led to a crisis of the political credibility of reformism. But the problem was that it was difficult to re-create the influence of syndicalism and revolutionary organisations seemed to be small and irrelevant. It seemed that it was not possible to realise social progress in terms of the role of socialist parties and the activity of the working class. Miliband notes that in this situation it seemed that the possibility of progressive change had become connected to the role of the new social movements of activists. (p139-140) But he considers that the possibility of the transformation of society based on this development is not likely to occur. However, the problem is not the apparent limitations of the new social movements but instead the fact that they do not generally support the aim of socialism. They accept the continuation of capitalism as an unalterable fact and so the objective is to get various bourgeois governments to implement their aims. This means that the accept the reformist logic of the social democratic parties. Hence Miliband would seem to be more credible when he suggests that the essential basis of political radicalisation is the transformation of the role of Social Democratic parties in a left-wing manner: “Social Democratic parties will remain arenas of struggle. But in conditions of economic, social and political malaise, with a political system unable to cope with evident ills like mass unemployment, deteriorating social and collective services, and general insecurity, the Left in these parties and outside, may in future be able to exercise a greater degree of influence than it has in the past.”(p147) This prediction has been realised in some parties like SYRIZA In Greece and the Labour party of the UK. But then the problem is how to effectively oppose the objectives of capital or to win general elections in order to be able to realise a left-wing programme. The point is that the radicalisation of various left-wing parties has not led to the development of successful strategies for the mobilisation of the people in order to realise genuine economic and political change. In other words, the issue of the ability to transform society by the creation of left wing parties has not been resolved by this development and instead the limitations of parliamentary politics seems to express inherent difficulties concerning a genuine change within various capitalist societies. The result of this difficulty is that demoralisation occurs which can only be to the advantage of the various conservative type parties. The problem is still how to develop forms of effective class struggle which can facilitate the possibility of genuine change. But how can this prospect occur without the genuine and effective influence of a revolutionary expression of the objective of socialism? Miliband outlines how it has been difficult to develop genuine socialist political organisations because of the reformist and bureaucratic degeneration of Social Democracy and Stalinism, and the various problems associated with the alternative expressed by Trotskyism. But he then concludes that there is essentially no alternative than to emphasise the importance of the regeneration of a radical role for Social Democracy in the formation of a possible radical type government with the aim of the promotion of transition to a genuine socialist society. But the point is how to develop the support of the working class and the majority of society for this objective? He only addresses this point in the dogmatic terms that the various limitations of capitalism because of its generation of unemployment, inequality, poverty and other problems will create the basis for the election of left wing governments: “The accumulation of grievances which this implies will in time, bring about, on the basis of strong popular support at the polls and beyond, the accession to power of governments of the Left pledged to carry out measures of radical reform and renewal throughout the social order.”(p158) But such a prediction has no credible basis for its possible development and instead it is merely a hope that ignores the apparent general right wing character of contemporary social democracy. The point is that the various organisations of social democracy are committed to the continuation of capitalism and the people are not inclined to vote for and support radical alternatives. In this context it would seem that the very character of the present political system facilitates the possibility for the consolidation of the domination of capitalism. It has not been possible to develop a type of oppositional and potentially revolutionary type of politics that could facilitate the prospect of the demise of the present capitalist system. But what is the ultimate reason for this failure to develop genuine revolutionary politics based on the role of the working class? Miliband has not explained the reason for this development in adequate terms.

Richard Seymour explains the important political basis for the inability to create popular revolutionary politics in terms of the hegemony of the ruling class. He comments in his book: ‘Against Austerity’ (Pluto Press: London 2014) “There is a wider sense in which hegemony is used, to signify a situation in which the dominant faction of the ruling class achieves not only leadership of its own class, but also a degree of consent for its social goals within the wider society. It doesn’t merely coerce and dominate but, by articulating an ‘historic mission’ which arouses broad support, secures leadership over other classes.”(p38) This understanding of hegemony is based on the views of Gramsci who was aware of the complexities involved in the attempt to overcome the domination of capital by the forces of labour. It can also be argued that the problematical character of Social Democracy was that it was an acceptance of this ruling class hegemony and so it rejected the aim of the transformation of capitalism in favour of the modification of capitalism via the introduction of the welfare state. On this basis it attempted to develop support for its objectives within the working class. Hence the character of the political system has not challenged the hegemony of the ruling class and it has not been possible to establish the influence of a radical standpoint that has been able to outline a principled alternative to this character of hegemony. However it could be argued that the situation of austerity which has resulted from the development of the economic crisis of capitalism has created the possibility to undermine the hegemony of the ruling class: “The crisis brings to fruition the generic elements of crisis which are always present in the capitalist system. These tendencies arise from conflicts inherent in the system – the vertical conflict between capital and labour (class struggle) and the horizontal conflict between capitals (competition) – which result in chronic dysfunctions, whether in the form of underconsumption or a tendency for the rate of return on investment to fall. Each crisis of capitalism, if it is not resolved by a catastrophic destruction of capital through depression of war, thus allowing for a new phrase of dynamism to begin, here is nothing short of an attack on capitalist class power, involving the redistribution of wealth, the socialisation of investment, and the democratisation of politics and industry.”(p41) But this conclusion is optimistic because it can also be suggested that the very onset of crisis can facilitate the development of the ability of capital to undermine the interests of labour in terms of the role of deflation and mass unemployment. The point is that the effectiveness of the response of the working class to this situation of deflation depends on the level of its consciousness and effectiveness of the role of its mass organisations. For example, the mass unemployment in France during the 1930’s led to the occupation of the factories by the workers and the realisation of important social reforms. But in other situations what occurred was the victory of fascism. Also, Seymour seems to contradict his conclusion by outlining how in situations of increasing recession and unemployment the administrations of Reagan and Thatcher were able to create popular mass movements in favour of their reactionary and pro-capitalist politics. The point that seems to be ignored is the very aspect of hegemony that was outlined by Seymour as the major reason for the continuation of the capitalist system. This means that various struggles may occur that reject the aims of capital, but which are ultimately undermined in terms of their effectiveness because the participants cannot envisage any alternative possibility. Therefore, the possible effective conclusion of these disputes in terms of a challenge to the domination of the system does not occur because of the influence of the hegemony of the ruling class. The ultimate result of this situation is the role of the politics of austerity or the systematic attempt to undermine the social conditions of the majority of the population in the interests of capital. In this context the problem is that the only alternative to this situation is the revolutionary transformation of the present economic system but this does not occur because of the limits on the consciousness of the people who still aspire to achieve reforms and the continuation of the present system. The point is that the very development of austerity suggests the necessity for the development and realisation of an alternative system, but the consciousness and activity of the people seems to undermine this possibility. Instead the hegemony of the present system is upheld despite the increasing limitations of capitalism. In other words, people accept austerity not because they support it but instead because they cannot envisage the possibility of an alternative. In this context the forces of the left-wing are unable to promote what seems to be a credible rejection of this approach. Seymour considers that it is necessary to develop an approach that connects the defence of what is progressive within the present system with the aim of the realisation of a different and emancipatory society: “The defence of the status quo, the emphasis on what is popular about our agenda, must somehow be part of a system of articulations that enables us to advocate what is new and radical, and defend what is not yet popular. The articulating principles which enables us to do this are vital. If we attempt to ground our agenda in terms of the dominant criteria of what is good for capitalism, we cannot win.”(p159) But he also outlines the very problems with this approach because the level of consciousness for the realisation of support for this approach is lacking because of the very defeats of the struggles of the working class and other social forces: “And this is where the Left’s deepest problem lies: in the deep rooted crisis of confidence in the possibility of radical alternatives not just to capitalism as such, but to neoliberalism. The Left remains incoherent and fragmented on this point, and has thus far been unable to mediate between its agitation for piecemeal reforms or specific defensive struggles on the one hand, and its most abstract maximalist agenda….on the other.”(p159-160) Thus the forces of the Left-wing lack a credible strategy that can promote the promotion of the realisation of the aim of progressive change, but this aspect must be connected to the problems associated with the low level of consciousness of the people that this development is feasible and possible. Instead the very hegemony of the aims of conservatism has undermined the generation of struggle to achieve progressive policies. Seymour outlines the necessity to establish left wing governments with a credible policy to tackle austerity and so establish the basis for more progressive change. But how are such governments to be established if people generally accept the apparent policies associated with the implementation of austerity. Furthermore, even when a left- wing government has been established as in Greece, it is under pressure to accept the imperatives associated with the implementation of austerity. Seymour is also aware that the decline of the influence and membership of the trade unions has undermined their ability to be able to change society. However, he tries to ignore the implications of his own analysis that it is very difficult to develop effective popular opposition to capitalism by suggesting that the development of popular struggle against the system is possible. He advocates the necessity of a militant strategy that is based on the unification of the interests of all the diverse sections of the working class into the formation of a militant new social movement. But he is actually most convincing when he outlines the reasons why this possibility is difficult to realise: “When a majority of workers have never had anything to do with a union, will tell pollsters they never talk about politics, support the most draconian cuts to welfare, and are passive or acquiesce in the face of reactionary politics they don’t agree with, there is a deep problem of class subjectivity which cannot be overcome….on a demo. We can win victories now, but we have a generation of slow, patient work in front of us if we are to fundamentally change things around.”(p188) This ambiguous conclusion does not outline any convincing explanation of how it could be possible to develop class consciousness to the level in which people become convinced of the necessity of struggle to transform the character of capitalism. Instead what seems to be more plausible is an explanation of why people have been reluctant to oppose the system and instead accept the policies of various governments that support the continuation of capitalism. This problem is connected to the difficulties associated with developing effective opposition to austerity. It seems that the working class and other sections of society have reluctantly accepted the continuation of the capitalist system and the connected imposition of austerity in order to consolidate its domination in a situation of economic crisis. However, when Jeremy Corbyn proposed a policy to reject austerity, he generated popular support for this approach. This was the expression of the possibility to create an alliance based on the development of a mass movement to reject austerity. But the problem was that this perspective was primarily based on the issue of winning a general election. There was no connection of this standpoint to the objective of mobilising people to try and create the political conditions for the advance of the realisation of the aims being promoted by Corbyn. Furthermore, this programme was shown to be less popular than the alternative of the popular nationalism expressed by support for BREXIT. The issue that was relevant in this context was the fact that the discontent with austerity had not led to a related level of class consciousness that could oppose the alternative influence of the nationalism associated with BREXIT. But this very nationalism was connected to the general defensive character of the class struggle of the workers in the recent period. The idea that militancy of a trade union character could result in gains for the working class had been discredited by the defeats of the recent period. In this context the question that arose was could the apparent importance of the struggles of various activists replace the apparent role of the working class in relation to the issue of influencing the character of capitalism and so promoting the possibility of progressive change?

One book that studies these issues is by Nick Sernick and Alex Williams: ‘Inventing the Future’ Verso, London 2016. They argue that the problem with the various mass movements of protest against various aspects of capitalism is that they lack the promotion of a credible alternative: “The utopian potentials inherent in a twenty-first technology cannot remain bound to a parochial capitalist imagination; they must be liberated by an ambitious left alternative. Neo-liberalism has failed, social democracy is impossible; and only an alternative vision can bring about universal prosperity and emancipation. Articulating and achieving this better world is the fundamental task of the left today.”(p3) But the question that immediately arises is how can it be possible to establish popular support for an alternative if people accept the apparent supremacy of the present capitalist system? The authors argue that the major manifestation of discontent with the system in terms of various activist campaigns has not resulted in the possibility of making progress towards the realisation of change and advance towards successful attaining an alternative to capitalism. What is being argued is that there is a problem with the perspectives of the various activists which means that their aims and objectives are in some manner not realistic and obtainable. It may be possible for demonstrations to achieve limited and immediate results, such as increasing awareness of the objectives of these protests, but anti-war actions do not result in an end to the imperialist character of various governments. In other words, various mass actions cannot change the character of society. Indeed, the authors argue that the aim of constant protest has increasingly replaced the perspective of achieving successful change in the policies of governments. The very mobilisation of people is an expression of the inability to realise the objectives of the protests. In the past genuine success was achieved in the struggles of workers and other groups within society, but the folk-politics that motivates the various actions of protestors has expressed forms of ideology that are not able to respond to the challenges posed by the increasing complexity of contemporary society: “As a first approximation, we can therefore define folk-politics as a collective and historically constituted political common sense that has become out of joint with the actual mechanisms of power. As our political, economic, social and technological world changes, tactics and strategies which were previously capable of transforming collective power into emancipatory gains has now become drained of their effectiveness.”(p10) Thus the various forms of activism have serious strategic issues that they have been unable to resolve in terms of the attempt to realise their objectives. The successful experience of various socialist parties, trade unions and protest movements in the past have become problematical in the present. There is the necessity to evaluate these apparent failures in a serious manner and to outline possible alternatives in terms of the development of more effective strategies of change. In other words, the role of various social agencies is not being questioned, but instead the feasibility of the strategies that they advocate is considered to be problematical. The aspects of spontaneity and the importance of local community as opposed to national and international concerns are being emphasised but this means that the domination of global capitalism is not being recognised and so there is a failure to develop a strategy that can transform this situation. Understanding the increasing importance of folk politics it is necessary to understand the increasing inability of social democratic parties to oppose the influence of neo-liberalism, the defeats of the trade union movement and the contrasting importance of various community based campaigns: “Drawing influence from the earlier social movements, this latest cycle of struggles comprises groups that tend to privilege the local and the spontaneous, the horizontal and the anti-state. The apparent plausibility of folk politics rests on the collapse of traditional modes of organisation on the left, of the co-optation of social democratic parties into a choice-less neoliberal hegemony, and the broad sense of disempowerment engendered by the insipidness of contemporary politics. In a world where the most serious problems we face seem to be complex, folk politics presents an alluring way to prefigure egalitarian futures for the present. On its own, however, this kind of politics is unable to give rise to long-lasting forces that might supersede, rather than merely resist global capitalism.” (p22)

But if this criticism is to be effective it is necessary to outline a strategy that is able to convincingly overcome the limitations of what is generally a localised form of political activism. The authors outline how the approach of folk politics is based on the importance of activism, the approach of direct democracy, the formation of autonomous communities, and the rejection of a struggle for political power. This means that even if it is possible to establish specific expressions of popular forms of direct rule the possibility to challenge the supremacy of the dominant economic and political system is not possible and feasible. The ultimate result of these limitations is that the possibility to challenge the supremacy of capitalism is not possible and instead what are essentially single-issue campaigns cannot be sustained. Hence: “Across these groups, a, series of judgements are widely accepted: small is beautiful, the local is ethical, simpler is better, permanence is oppressive, progress is over. These kinds of ideas are favoured over any counter-hegemonic project – a politics that might contend with capitalist power on the largest scales.”(p46) However the limitations of these activist movements occurs alongside the decline of the importance of social democracy and the defeat of its reformist project. This development has occurred alongside the decline of the trade unions and the undermining of their influence within society. But the problem with this analysis is that it would seem that there is no effective expression of the possibility of opposition to the domination of capitalism. The very approach of the author seems to raise important questions about the issue of the possibility of the role of an agency of progressive change. Such an interpretation of these views seems to be reinforced by the analysis of the increasing influence of the role of neo-liberalism and its successful undermining of the role of the welfare state. It is argued that the alternative of the authors is to contend that it is necessary to have a strategy that can establish genuine economic and political freedom based on the realisation of a basic income for all people and the ability to be able to define the character of the role of work. This means the domination of capital has to be ended and instead different priorities established in relation to the character of the role of production. But the problem with this analysis is that whilst it is possible to outline the limitations of capitalism in terms of the inability to realise the liberation of the workers, and to outline the principles of a better and different type of society, what is not being addressed is how and who is to realise these more progressive developments. Indeed, the authors do not provide optimism about the possibility of the generation of this type of change. Instead they contend: “To achieve a meaningful post-work society therefore requires changing the present political conditions. In turn this requires the left to face up squarely to the dismal situation before it: trade unions lying in ruins, political parties rendered into neoliberal puppets, and a waning intellectual and cultural hegemony.”(p129) Thus the author has outlined important reasons why the possibility of change seems to be very unfavourable. In other words, the various attempts to change society have failed: “Given the limits of these other approaches, we argue that the best way forward is a counter-hegemonic strategy. This is a strategy that is adaptable from positions of weakness, is scalable from the local to the global, and recognises the hold that capitalism has over every aspect of our lives, from our most intimate desires to the most abstract financial flows. A counter-hegemonic strategy entails a project to overturn the dominant neoliberal common sense and rejuvenate the collective imagination. Fundamentally it is an attempt to install a new common sense – one organised around the crisis of work and its effects on the proletariat. In this, it involves preparatory work for moments when full-scale struggle erupts, transforming our social imagination and reconfiguring our sense of what is possible. It builds up support and common language for a new world, seeking to alter the balance of power in preparation for when a crisis upsets the legitimacy of society. Unlike folk politics, such a strategy is expansive, long-term, comfortable with abstraction and complexity, and aimed at overthrowing capitalist universalism.”(p132) But the issue that has to also be addressed is how to develop popular support for this perspective and a connected willingness to strive to realise it by the people. The authors provide an answer to this question in terms of the development of mass support for a counter-hegemonic project of change. However, the very problem that they had implied was that the influence of the hegemony of the present economic and political system implies that this development will be difficult to realise. This problematical aspect is connected to the apparent inability of the various activist struggles to be able to achieve fundamental change and so generate the possibility for the realisation of more radical transformation of society. So, given these problematical issues how is the approach of the authors able to address them? They suggest that the basis to develop support for the aims of a democratic struggle for change is based on the importance of the promotion of a utopian conception of an alternative possibility for the organisation of human activity: “In elaborating an image of the future, utopian thought also generates a viewpoint from which the present becomes open to critique. It suspends the appearance of the present as inevitable and brings to light aspects of the world that would otherwise go unnoticed, raising questions that must be constitutively excluded….The utopian demand from the future therefore implores us to question the givens of our world. In these ways, utopias can be both a negation of the present and affirmation of a possible future.”(p140) But how is the ideological domination of the view that the present is unalterable be challenged by the development of support for this utopian alternative? Surely it is necessary to develop a mass movement with a utopian objective and this is a difficult task and also how would the utopian approach differ from the apparently discredited advocacy of socialism that has been the basis of the traditional conception of an alternative to capitalism? The problem is that the issue of change is reduced to the assertion of the importance of a counter-hegemonic strategy, but it is not apparent how this would promote the realisation of a utopian society. How would the domination of bourgeois ideology be overcome so that the creation of a mass movement for change is both developed and becomes successful? But it could be argued that the principles of what are the aspects of a process of the genuine revolutionary transformation of society have been outlined. Therefore the authors have outlined important criteria of what is the potential for change: “A counter-hegemonic strategy would include efforts to transform the common sense of society, revive a utopian social imagination, rethink the possibilities of economics, and eventually repurpose technological and economic infrastructures. None of these steps are sufficient…..They prepare the ground for a moment when transformative change can occur, backed by a mass movement.”(p152) Thus the aims of a strategy of change have been outlined in terms of the advocacy of a credible utopian alternative to the exploitative limitations of capitalism, and this is an important point. But the crucial question that needs to be addressed is how can the hegemonic ideological domination of the interests of the present system be overcome? The point is that people may not be genuinely satisfied with the capitalist system, but they accept its continuation because they cannot envisage an alternative. So how can the utopian conception of a different social formation acquire mass support and a related willingness to strive to realise it? It is argued by the authors that the very development of a conception of a viable alternative to capitalism can be the beginning of the creation of a mass movement for change. They suggest that: “A post-work world will not emerge out of the benevolence of the capitalists….the power of the left -broadly construed – needs to be rebuilt before a post-work society can become a meaningful strategic option. This will involve a broad counter-hegemonic project that seeks to overturn neoliberal common sense and to rearticulate new understandings of ‘modernisation’, ‘work’ and ‘’freedom’. This will necessarily be a populist project that mobilises a broad swathe of society and that, while being anchored in class interests, nevertheless being irreducible to them. It will involve a full spectrum approach to organisations….. under the aegis of a vision of a better world.”(p174) Thus it is ultimately suggested that the development of the influence of a society that is an alternative to capitalism can become the basis of mobilisation in favour of change. But the issue of the ideological domination of the view that there is no alternative to capitalism has not been sufficiently addressed. Therefore, on the one hand the authors have outlined the importance of the development of the ideological credibility of the aim of a different and utopian type of society if the generation of struggle for change is to be meaningful and effective. Nevertheless, they have not sufficiently addressed the various issues that undermine these developments and instead in an optimistic manner indicate the importance of various struggles that have occurred in favour of change. The fact is that in most situations the ideological domination of the capitalist class has not been challenged by the importance of various struggles of protest and activism. Instead such developments have involved small groups of people who are not able to promote the possibility of the realisation of revolutionary change. Indeed, this is not their intention. Hence, we can consider it problematical that various groups of activists can facilitate the success of a counter-hegemonic project that is able to facilitate the transformation of society. Thus, the views of the authors are problematical because ultimately in a dogmatic manner they consider that support for a utopian alternative to capitalism can be generated and so result in the transformation of society. This perspective actually underestimates the enduring character of the ideological hegemonic domination of the present capitalist system. Hence the issue of the development of the influence of a utopian alternative to capitalism has to be created to a credible strategy that can actually result on the mobilisation of people in favour of this process of transformation. However, the authors have established an important point in suggesting that change cannot occur without people being motivated by the possibility of the realisation of a society that is different to capitalism. The limitations of most struggles that occur is because they accept the continuation of the present system and so do not promote the importance of a revolutionary strategy of change. Instead of this recognition of the problems associated with most forms of mass activity the authors consider that the process of change can ultimately occur because they can establish a dynamic of transformation based on the inspiration of a utopian conception of an alternative to capitalism. This aim could have credibility if a strategy to overcome the limitations of present struggles can be shown to be possible. But the problematical point is that most struggles are based on the assumption of the necessity for the various protest movements to achieve their aims within the present system. In this context the motivation provided by a utopian alternative is generally not important, or even that the conception of utopia becomes connected to the continuation of capitalism. Ultimately the limitation of the authors is that they do not provide a perspective of the possible development of the revolutionary consciousness of the participants in the various forms of mass action. They do outline the necessity of a counter-hegemonic strategy, but what does this mean in precise terms? There is no apparent answer to this question apart from the assumption that the various protests can acquire a dynamic of change that results in the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society. However, such an understanding is not outlined in satisfactory and detailed terms. Instead an assumption is made that the promotion of a utopian approach can result in the generation of a popular movement for change. It is still necessary to connect the utopian objective to a credible understanding of how genuine revolutionary transformation of society can be realised.

Given the apparent limitations of an important expression of the utopian conception of an alternative to capitalism in terms of the apparent lack of a credible strategy of change, could it be argued that a Marxist approach is still valid in terms of being the most effective basis of how capitalism is to be overcome and replaced with the socialist alternative? In other words, is Marxism still the most important basis of a strategy of change and the development of the class struggle in these terms? This issue will be analysed in terms of a study of the views of Kieran Allen and his book: ‘Marx and the Alternative to Capitalism’ (Pluto Press, London 2011) Allen provides a useful summary of the ideas of Marx. In relation to his understanding of the class struggle he outlines how Marx essentially concludes that the dynamics of the opposition of the workers to the domination of capital generates the potential for revolutionary change and the creation of an alternative to the present economic system. Allen outlines the approach of Marx in the following terms: “Marx did not advocate a narrow, syndicalist approach that only championed workers rights. He believed that the working class was unique because it was capable of giving voice to the grievances of all in society. As it became political, it could come forward as the representative of the whole of society, capable of organising a new economy that served people and not profit. But a consciousness of this historic role did not develop automatically as workers sometimes accepted conservative ideas which aided the oppression of others. Such a consciousness could only emerge in struggle where workers learnt to remake themselves as a class of liberation.”(p72-73) This standpoint expresses an orthodox and determinist view that the dynamics of class struggle can generate the possibility of revolutionary change. What this understanding underestimates is the importance of the influence of bourgeois ideology which undermines the possibility to develop revolutionary class consciousness. This aspect can be connected to the influence of reformist rather than revolutionary parties. The point is that the approach of Marx underestimated the complexity involved in the development of revolutionary class struggle by the workers. His approach was basically that the exploitation of labour by capital would generate the possibility of popular opposition by workers to the domination of the capitalist system. But actual historical development has proved to be more complex and the influence of ideology has undermined the generation of the connection of the discontent of the workers with the economic system into becoming a conscious expression of an aspiration for revolutionary change. Hence it was not until the theoretical work of Gramsci that the complexities of the class struggle were more adequately understood in terms of the importance of the conception of hegemony. Indeed, Allen essentially modifies his initial position when he outlines the importance of ideology for the perpetuation of the domination of capital over labour. But this recognition of the role of ideology is essentially undermined by his contrasting view that the character of the struggles of the workers can result in the undermining of the ideas that perpetuate the system: “This elementary fact means that struggles break out against the rule of capital even when those waging them are not clear about an alternative to it. Many workers who strike or join unions continue to endorse the dominant ideas of society. Yet the very experience of banding together in a society that promotes individual competition leads to a deeper questioning.”(p107) This understanding would imply that the logical outcome of the development of the influence of the trade unions suggests that society can be transformed in a revolutionary manner. But this does not occur because the ultimate role of the trade unions is to negotiate with the employers on behalf of the workers. Allen outlines how the character of the trade unions promotes the importance of the aspect of solidarity or united action by the workers, but this development is not sufficient in order to create the possible revolutionary transformation of society. Instead what is required is the influence of a revolutionary party which can connect the collective actions of the workers to the validity of a strategy of the transformation of society. However, it has been the lack of this type of connection and development which has meant the potential of trade union struggles has often not been realised. But it is also necessary to establish that because of the primary emphasis of the trade unions on the process of negotiating improvements for the workers with the employers this situation means that these organisations are not necessarily favourably inclined to supporting revolutionary type objectives. Only the influence of the aims of the realisation of a socialist alternative can ensure that the trade unions can adopt radical objectives like the establishment of workers control of production. This means that the transformation of the character of the trade unions is connected to the expression of the influence of Marxist objectives. Without this development the role of the trade unions will generally be about the importance of negotiating improvements for the workers within the limitations of the capitalist system. Hence the issue becomes how to develop the increased influence of Marxism within the trade unions. This aspect seems to be increasingly problematical given the apparent decline of the importance of Marxism and the failure of its Trotskyist expression to acquire mass support. As a result of this situation the trade unions tend to support the objectives of reformism as in relation to their relationship to the British Labour party. Hence the trade unions become a bulwark of the objective of the improvement of society rather than supporting its radical transformation. This issue is not adequately addressed by Allen who instead is content to outline the possible potential for the transformation of the trade unions into becoming an expression of the aims of revolutionary change. But this development has only essentially occurred in relation to the influence of Syndicalist ideology which was based on the perspective that the trade unions can change the character of society by application of the tactic of the role of the general strike. The general decline of the influence of Syndicalism has meant that the view that the trade unions could express the possibility to change society has become increasingly discredited. Instead the Bolshevik revolution led to a renewed emphasis on the importance of the role of the Marxist party. But this approach has become discredited with the opportunist regression of both Social Democracy and Stalinism. However, the possible alternative of the role of a new type of revolutionary party has not been realised. As a result of this situation there seems to be a lack of an effective organisation that can relate the discontent of the workers with the present system to the aim of revolutionary transformation. This has meant that any opposition to the objectives of capitalism has been without an effective political expression. The result of this situation has been that the system is able to continue despite the increasing expression of economic crisis and political uncertainty.

Allen implies that this very development of crisis makes the issue of the development of the role of a revolutionary party an urgent issue: “Capitalism has entered a protracted period of uncertainty, crisis and suffering for the majority. The issue of how to lift the real barrier of capital itself has become more pressing.” (p150) However the point is that this development of the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism does not imply the possibility of the generation of a favourable situation in which the possibility of socialism has become more favourable. Instead it is quite possible that the very intensification of economic problems can result in the promotion of the increased influence of reactionary views which actually undermine the possibility of revolutionary change. This type of development has occurred in Britain since the recent onset of the period of austerity since the intensification of the economic crisis. The policy of austerity promoted by Conservative governments has led to support for populist nationalism as expressed in the majority vote of the referendum that led to rejection of the UK’s membership of the EU. In this context the left wing Corbyn leadership of the Labour party was unable to oppose the populist appeal of the Johnston led Conservative party in the recent general election. The influence of a radical agenda was defeated by the greater appeal of a right-wing nationalist approach, and many working-class people voted for the Conservatives despite having been generally loyal supporters of the Labour party. In other words, the period of austerity had had a profound effect in undermining the level of class consciousness and as a result increasing mass opposition to the standpoint of a left-wing political approach. Furthermore, the recent situation had not led to mass struggles which could have encouraged the increased influence of radical ideas. There was also no credible revolutionary organisation which could have facilitated the generation of the political importance of a Marxist approach. Instead the importance of radicalism was apparently limited to the influence of the Corbyn led Labour party. Therefore, the defeat of the Labour party in the recent election seemed to be the rejection of the credibility of a left-wing standpoint and instead seemed to express the superiority of right-wing populism within the population of the UK. Allen contends that workers become radicalised by the experience of class struggle. This point may be valid but what occurs when the class struggle is apparently at a low level? It would seem that such a situation is favourable to the increased influence of reactionary views and the rejection of the objectives of Marxism and its revolutionary approach. Various Marxist organisations try to gloss over these problems by calling for the development of struggles, but they do not ask the related question as to why these struggles are generally not occurring. The point is that they are unable to develop an approach to try and advance the influence of the ideas of Marxism in the unfavourable situation of low level of struggle and the related increased importance of reactionary views. Allen outlines how revolutionary situations can be the logical outcome of the intensification of class struggle, but he seems not to be able to explain how to create a process of advance from the present unfavourable situation of little support for Marxism and the contrasting stable domination of capitalism and the related importance of bourgeois parties. In this context it would seem that Marxism is an antiquated doctrine that has no ability to be able to motivate workers to oppose capitalism. But instead of addressing these aspects Instead in a vague manner, Allen refers to the strategy of Marx as being ‘engaging with contemporary workers struggles’ and “In this scenario, ‘doing something’ meant contributing to the class struggle in the hope that it would usher in a new society if victorious”(p156) But this supposed perspective is not a credible strategy and is instead a vague approach that does not tackle the issue of the ideological domination of the ruling class and the related lack of influence of the forces of revolutionary Marxism. Therefore, instead of addressing the issues of the complexities of the class struggle, Allen instead relies on the justification of an ideal strategy of revolutionary change that does not address the issue of the ideological domination of the present economic system.

It could be argued that the primary political role of the workers has been replaced by the role of the activist. But the problems with this understanding is that the various forms of activism seem to express no aspiration to change society in a revolutionary manner. These types of struggle do not challenge the overall ideological hegemony of capitalism. But this aspect does not concern organisations like the Socialist Workers party who in a vague manner advocate the intensification of struggle with the vague hope that this will facilitate the possibility of radical change. But how is such a possible development to be connected to the development of revolutionary consciousness? This aspect is not explained, and instead assumptions are made that at a certain moment in history the various struggles will acquire a definite revolutionary expression. This is a vague hope rather than the articulation of a credible perspective. What is problematical is that the importance of the development of the role of the revolutionary party in the promotion of class struggle is actually being ignored in terms of an emphasis on the apparent dynamics of the forms of mass action into becoming transformed into a revolutionary opposition to capitalism. Ultimately what is being suggested is that to imply that somehow the very dynamics of struggle will automatically create revolutionary possibilities has been discredited by historical experience itself. Only in a situation of the interaction of party and class did successful revolutionary change occur. Hence the major issue is how to facilitate this type of development in contemporary political conditions. There is no apparent substitute for this type of approach. However, does this mean that the party becomes the effective substitute for the role of the class? This is the issue that has to be tackled in order to complete this article.

The point being made is that the workers without the influence of the revolutionary party are generally unable to overcome the domination of bourgeois ideology and so are subordinated to the interests of the capitalist system. This does not mean that they cannot carry out forms of struggle to defend their class interests, but that the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society is not generated by the dynamics of these various forms of mass struggle to uphold the interests of the workers. What is being suggested is that the awareness of the limitations of capitalism as a system requires the ideological intervention of the role of a party that is able to indicate this important aspect of reality and so outline a perspective that would enable the workers to be able to realise the possibility of a revolutionary alternative to the present system. But the problem is that the very experience of the role of Marxist parties has apparently discredited the importance of their role and so the result is that the dominant parties that appeal for support from the workers have traditionally tended to be reformist organisations that have no intention of aspiring to try and transform society. Robert Lanning in his book: ‘Georg Lukacs and Organizing Class Consciousness’ (MEP publications, Minnesota 2009) suggests that to Marx the workers are able to generate the necessary class consciousness from the very dynamics of the class struggle: “The proletariat advances only by becoming conscious of itself and the necessity of its own negation. Its termination as a class is the height of its consciousness in bourgeois society…..But once the idea of historical necessity, understood as a choice between alternatives, becomes a fact of consciousness and a value judgement on capitalist society, it takes the status of a material force of self-activity for at least a portion of the class…..In the face of poverty, exploitation, or racism, it is precisely the decisions “this or that proletarian” will take that contribute to making the difference for developing and sustaining a social movement to ameliorate those social conditions.”(p39) But it can be suggested that the workers acting in terms of the role of a historical necessity established by the exploitative limitations of capitalism has not led to the realisation of revolutionary change. The discontent of the workers with the capitalist system has only resulted in the possibility of social transformation when it has been connected to the role of a revolutionary party. The spontaneous dynamics of the class struggle are not sufficient to develop the necessity clarity and sense of purpose that could facilitate the ability of the discontented workers to be able to transform the character of society. Indeed, Lanning accepts that the issue of the development of the consciousness of the necessity of changing the character of society requires the role of mediation, or the importance of the activity of the party. Hence whilst spontaneous developments in the class struggle can create the potential for the realisation of change this aspect cannot be effectively realised without the important connection of these developments to the role of the party. However Lanning also seems to contradict himself when he also suggests that the development of class consciousness does not suggest the importance of the role of a revolutionary party and is instead about the workers becoming conscious of their distinct class interests.(p44) He suggests that: “From the point of view of the working class, there are interests generated and further developed from a consciousness of common conditions: interest in common human conditions, the possibility of realising individual and collective aspirations, and the possibility of a common response to them.”(p44) However these aspects of what is the expression of the activity of workers in organised and collective terms can only generate the possibility to defend and uphold minimal interests. These aspects do not generate the possibility of or consciousness of the importance of revolutionary change. However in an ambiguous manner this is the very conclusion made by Lanning that in some automatic manner the role of class struggle results in a minority of the workers becoming receptive to the aim of the transformation of society: “But there are also political interests developed initially, at least by a minority of the class whose consciousness provides a basis for class-wide knowledge of capitalism; that is an understanding of the relation of people to the system as a whole, who are not deterred from feelings of hostility toward the opposing class, and who possess a vision of a future society.”(p45) But such a conclusion would seem to be an optimistic standpoint because the issue of the actual dynamic whereby this consciousness of support for an alternative to capitalism is not established in terms of the character of the class struggle. What is not outlined is the role of a revolutionary party which would seem to have an important role in facilitating the transformation of discontent of workers with capitalism into support for the aim of a socialist alternative. However, Lanning does accept that the very development of the understanding of the importance of the role of the domination of capital over labour requires theoretical reflection and so this suggests the significance of the Marxist party in order to indicate the character of capitalism and why the workers need to overthrow this system. However, Lanning also contradicts this understanding because his ultimate emphasis refers to the role of the self-activity of the working class: “To summarize, the actions of the working class are not evolutionary or in any way automatic simply because the class can possess the theoretical key for unlocking the forces of social change and the eventual realization of socialist society. Nothing compels this but the self-activity of the class itself and mediating influences it finds or creates within the environment of capitalist society and class conflict.”(p53) In an ambiguous manner this implies that the workers by their own actions and level of consciousness can facilitate the possibility of the transformation of society. But such a development has not occurred despite important expressions of the discontent of the workers with capitalism. Furthermore, Lanning seems to contradict this emphasis with his discussion of Lukacs’s view about the importance of the development of a process of interaction between the spontaneity of the workers and the conscious role of the party if revolutionary change is to be realised. This connection is very complex to realise given the influence of bourgeois ideology over the very character of the spontaneous consciousness of the workers and the limitations of the very revolutionary parties which means that they may not promote the most effective or principled strategy for the change of society by the workers. The combination of these aspects means that there are important complicating factors in relation to the task of the revolutionary transformation of capitalism into socialism. But the primary problem is the importance of the very influence of bourgeois ideology which continually discredits the validity of the perspective of revolutionary change. It has been this aspect which has been most important in the generation of the political conditions which facilitate the possibility of the continuation of the capitalist system. In this context despite being aware of the importance of the role of ideology the various revolutionary parties do not seem to consider the necessity of developing a theoretical critique of the influence of the standpoint of the bourgeoisie. Instead they seem to emphasise that the development of struggle against capitalism will somehow resolve these issues. This is also the view of EP Thompson who indicates the importance of the mass actions of the workers for generating the possibility to overcome the influence of bourgeois ideology. But the problem is that this approach does not seem to have provided a basis for an effective rejection of the importance of the standpoint of support for capitalism within the working class. Instead there seems to be no alternative to the development of the influence of the role of the revolutionary party in promoting a strategy of change that can become popular with the working class: “The Communist party was the “form of the class consciousness of the proletariat”……The class consciousness that it “ascribed” to the working class was the party’s active stressing of its rational political knowledge and the strategy developed from it, grounded in an understanding of a deliberately plotted historical direction that could be known and understood by anyone. It is the programmatic organization of that knowledge out of what was grasped as objectively possible.”(p191) Therefore the opportunist degeneration of what was the principled revolutionary party could only result in the serious undermining of the class consciousness of the workers and related problems for the development of the class struggle. It could be argued that this problem has never been resolved since the opportunist degeneration of Stalinism in the 1920’s. The problem is that the working class in spontaneous terms is not able to develop and articulate a revolutionary strategy for change. Only in terms of the development of the revolutionary party will this objective be realised. Hence the political crisis of the working class creates serious problems about the realisation of success in the international class struggle.

In other words, there seems to be serious issues about the possibility for the successful overthrow of capitalism by the revolutionary action of the working class. There is no popular and effective Marxist party that is able to outline a credible strategy for change, and the spontaneous actions of the workers are not sufficient in order to generate the possibility of the transformation of capitalism into socialism. It has been argued that the role of contemporary activists represents an adequate replacement for the previous revolutionary potential of the working class. But the problem is that these various forms of popular struggle do not aspire to change society, and so lack any potential revolutionary possibilities. Nor is there an effective revolutionary party which could provide these activists with a genuine strategy of change. Instead the capitalist system is able to accept the problems associated wit various forms of activist struggle because it is understood that such types of protest are not sufficient to create the conditions for the generation of the political conditions that would make radical change a possibility. Hence there is still no alternative than to promote the development of a Marxist party that is able to appeal for support from the working class and other exploited and oppressed sections of the population. But this possible development means that the various divisions between the competing revolutionary organisations have to be tackled and resolved. Only when it is possible to establish a single revolutionary party will it be able to appeal for support from the working class in an effective and principled manner. Hence the various organisations have to recognise that the obligations of the class struggle mean that their divisions have to be overcome and instead a united and democratic left-wing party has to be created. Such a development would mean that the prospects for the advance of the realisation of the aim of socialism had been seriously advanced. This united party would be able to make a revolutionary appeal for support from the working class, and it would be able to favourably contrast its principled programme with the continued opportunism and compromise represented by the major reformist parties. Such a party would also be able to promote the prospects for the increased influence of socialist ideas within the reformist party, and so in this manner a genuine united front based on the objective of socialism would be advanced in an effective manner. Therefore, the present tasks of the class struggle are connected with the task of the development of a genuine and popular revolutionary party. Without this development the possibility to achieve socialism will be immensely more difficult. However, such a possibility is connected to increased support for a credible strategy of change. This is why such an issue will be the subject of a different article.

However additional points still have to be made about the prospects of success of the class struggle. Luke Cooper and Simon Hardy in ‘Beyond Capitalism’ (Zero Books, Hants 2012) make the point that the forces of revolutionary Marxism are small and unable to develop popular support for strategies of change. They may be involved in the various struggles that occur, but they often lack influence and the related ability to promote the popularity of the aim of the transformation of capitalism into socialism. They suggest that the period of increasing economic crisis, which is connected to the role of the policy of austerity, has created the possibility for the renewal of the politics of revolutionary socialism, but that the situation of the effective crisis of the forces of Marxism has undermined the possibility to realise this development. However the problem with this view is that it assumes the connection of the situation of crisis with possible favourable opportunities for the renewal of the forces of Marxism, but the very problem is that these forces have become marginalised and insignificant over the recent period. Instead the interests of the standpoint of capitalism have apparently become more important and popular because of the apparent inability to develop a credible alternative to this situation of the increased power and influence of the forces that support capitalism. This situation is connected to what seems to be a crisis of the role of a strategy for change. There seems to be no alternative than to develop defensive struggles to maintain present conditions rather than express the possibility of the transformation of society: “With the displacement of Marxism, there is a relative absence of real strategy, i.e. a relative lack of discussion of how political power should be used, and around what form and organisation a challenge for power should take, if we are to win radical change. While talking about political power might appear far removed from the current stage of resistance, unless we do so, then we are implicitly reinforcing the capitalist realist logic of the current movement.”(p37) But these limitations are the result of defeats in the class struggle which seem to have discredited the approach of the validity and importance of the activity of various forms of mass movement. Instead the domination of capital over labour seems to have become an unquestioned and permanent aspect of social reality, and the role of the struggle of the people against the system seems to have become an ineffective aspect that has increasingly less chance of success. Indeed, the authors refer to the importance of the decline of the importance of the organisations of the labour movement given the increased ability of the forces of capital to impose their economic and political agenda onto society. This is because of political limitations of the conservative and bureaucratic character of the trade unions and the willingness of various governments, both of a conservative character and social democratic, to impose a neo-liberal approach onto society. Therefore, what is of primary importance is the realisation of the aim of the transformation of the character of the trade unions so that they become more responsive to the interests and aspirations of their members. But the authors do not outline a policy that would ensure that such a development could occur. Instead they seem to accept that the unions will remain defensive and limited organisations that are generally unable to oppose the imposition of right-wing policies by conservative type governments. What is problematical is that the possibility to develop an effective opposition to these developments seems to be unlikely because of the very lack of influence of the ideas of Marxism. The authors suggest that the forces of the Marxist left need to become more united so that they can promote the realisation of this aim, but how is this unity to be realised given the extent of the influence of the role of sectarianism within the Marxist groups? Furthermore, the authors also outline the apparent strategic limitations of the various activist groups which means that they cannot promote a strategy that is able to connect their struggles to a strategy to achieve genuine change. They connect the crisis of the forces of the Marxist left with the inability to develop forms of opposition to the demands of the system: “The contemporary crisis of the left is therefore both chronic and acute. The chronic problem remains the isolation of revolutionary socialists in the post-war world and their decline into sect form. The acute problem is the immediate inability to lead the resistance necessary to turn the tables on austerity and provide working class people with confidence and belief in the socialist project. In times of capitalist crisis these fault lines continually threaten to widen and deepen under the pressure of events.”(p113) But it would seem that these problematical aspects cannot be resolved in a progressive and efficient manner because the issue of sectarianism and the small scale character of the Marxist groups is not likely to be resolved in terms of the formation of a united organisation that is able to promote the importance of a strategy of change in credible terms. But the authors whilst admitting the difficulties involved with the realisation of this task also gloss over its difficulties with the call for the formation of a united anti-capitalist organisation that would be able to accommodate the significance of political differences. They do acknowledge that such a development could result in the expression of political instability, but that despite this problem they consider that there is no alternative than to try and create united political organisations. But surely the aspect that could create this type of organisational and political unity being proposed is the promotion of the role of an agreed strategy for change. However instead of addressing this issue in a serious and comprehensive manner the authors seem to gloss over providing an analysis of how political unity between the diverse forces of the Marxist left, and other groups, can be realised. What is vaguely being advocated is the development of the credibility of a strategy for change that combines activity to achieve limited aims combined with an emphasis on long-term aspirations, and this prospect is based on the formation of a united party dedicated to the aim of the transformation of society. We can support these objectives but also criticise the apparent failure to address how this possibility can be realised. The call for a united organisation that is able to democratically discuss the issue of a strategy of change can be supported, but the possible success of this objective does not in and of itself establish the generation of the pre-conditions of the dynamism and effectiveness of a struggle for change. The issue of strategy has still to be addressed, and this will be the subject of a different article.