UNDERSTANDING THE RESULTS OF THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTION

The recent result of the general election which has led to a significant majority for the reactionary Conservative Party is a defeat for the genuine interests of the working class and the aspiration to create a better type of society. This development will result in the continued imposition of austerity and the realisation of a reactionary form of Brexit that will undermine the possibility to create a more equal and better type of society. The reason for this victory of the Conservatives was the split between supporters of a Leave and Remain position with regards to the relationship of the UK to the EU. This situation was also connected to the successful portrayal of Jeremy Corbyn as being indecisive because of his attempt to reconcile the aspirations of Leave and Remain voters. The general election became an implicit referendum about the character of Corbyn and in this context the Tories did not have to promote their policies in a detailed manner. Instead the Tories became associated in a vague manner with the aim of the realisation of Brexit, and as a result they were able to win large number of seats in Labour areas. In this manner the expression of the class interests of the workers became replaced by a sentiment of popular nationalism and as a result the Tories were able to win a majority of seats, and this situation was expressed by the ability to win what were previously safe Labour constituencies. Ultimately the problem was that people had little interest in the generally impressive Labour manifesto and instead were preoccupied by the issue of Brexit. But the views of the people were divided between support for Leave or Remain and as a result the Tories were able to benefit from this divide and so win a majority of seats for their aim of the realisation of the most effective form of Brexit. Ultimately the problem was that large sections of the working class considered the interests of nation to be more important than those of class, and so as a result voted for the Conservatives. The promises of the Labour manifesto to create a better type of society were not influential and instead the Tories had popular support for the simple slogan of ‘getting Brexit done’. In other words, the objectives of the Labour party under its left-wing leadership had not become popular in electoral terms, and instead only the most dedicated activists were supporters of the objective of the transformation of society in order to realise socialist goals. Furthermore, the remain vote was split between the Liberals and the Labour party, and as a result it was possible for the Conservatives to monopolise the Leave vote. The Conservatives have become a populist and Bonapartist party in order to generate popular support and so undermine the influence of the Labour party.

The result of the general election is an indication that the position of many of the left groups in favour of connecting the aspiration of Brexit to socialist type views has also proved to be untenable. They failed to recognise that the only principled approach was to advocate the standpoint of Remain in connection with the elaboration of left-wing aspirations. This viewpoint would be connected to an appeal to Brexit supporters to recognise the validity of a new referendum on the issue of Brexit and the necessity to resolve this issue in the most progressive manner that upheld the interests of working people. Corbyn tried to advocate this type of approach, but the result was that he was criticised for being indecisive and unprincipled. The impatience about the issue of Brexit worked to the advantage of the Conservatives and so as a result they were able to win a majority at the general election by obtaining seats in what had been safe Labour areas. However, the result of the election is an indication that the Labour party has to consistently accept the popular appeal of Brexit. The aim of a referendum with the objective of the option of Remain should be rejected and instead the objective should be to promote the standpoint of a Peoples Brexit that is based on the importance of the realisation of workers rights, ecological aims and the rejection of the free market approach of the Tories. It is necessary to obtain the support of Remain voters to this position. In relation to the Labour party we should support the most left wing and principled person to replace Jeremy Corbyn, This, will probably be Rebecca Long-Bailey. The aim will be to uphold the views of the Labour manifesto and to reject any tendency to promote a right-wing adherence to the standpoint of reformism. It was not the policies of the Manifesto that led to the election defeat and instead what occurred was because the appeal of nation proved to be more influential than class interest.

The Socialist Workers Party do not accept that there were any problems with their pro Brexit stance in relation to the connection of the UK to the EU. Hence, they do not recognise that this perspective was only credible in terms of the approach of a Conservative government that was determined to realise this approach. In an article by Charlie Kimber: “After the Election Keep Up the Fight Against Tory Rule’ (Socialist Worker, December 13th 2019) it is accepted that a serious defeat for the genuine interests of the people has occurred with the election of a right-wing Tory government. But the strategic conclusions have not changed: “It is time to renew resistance, not to retreat. The battle goes on. For now, the Tories have a spring in their step. But a host of problems will return for them over Brexit and much else. (p1) This is a familiar approach which seems to underestimate the seriousness of the ideological problems caused by the election. The point is that the possibility of undermining the influence of the Conservatives within the working class is primarily an ideological issue of the success of what Gramsci would define as a strategy of the process of hegemony. It is necessary to challenge the ideas of the Conservatives, and this development cannot merely be about the development of mass struggle. Instead the standpoint of Marxism and socialism has to become more influential within the working class and this requires the development of convincing ideas that are able to challenge in an effective manner the influence of right wing populism. The point is that the election result is connected to the lack of popular influence of the ideas of Marxism and socialism. Such a development is related to the activism of the Marxist groups who imply that what is primarily required is the development of various forms of struggle and as a result the issue of the hegemony of the ruling class will begin to be resolved. Instead the importance of the generation of mass activity has to be connected to the promotion of the importance of the aim of socialism and the connected elaboration of the limitations of capitalism. But the various Marxist groups have neglected this task because of the activist view that what is required is to primarily generate the development of struggle and this will in some spontaneous manner resolve outstanding ideological and political issues. But what is not understood is that the low level of struggles is connected to what seems to be the enduring influence of right-wing views such as support for Brexit. This has meant that it seems to be more important to emphasise the importance of the UK leaving the EU than to try and defend the influence of the working class within society. Indeed, it seems to many people that it is not possible to defend and advance their interests in a militant manner. The various Marxist organisations have ignored this situation and have instead promoted the perspective of struggles by the workers, in a manner that ignores these difficulties. The result of the 2019 general election is an expression of the limitations of this activist stance, but Kimber ignores these lessons and instead advocates the necessity of developing struggles in a dogmatic manner that tries to deny the importance of the ideological reasons that have meant that mass activity is at a low level. What is required is to develop the credibility and validity of the arguments in favour of socialism, if mass action is to be developed in a serious and effective manner. But the very activist stance of organisations like the SWP mean that its level of theoretical understanding is at a low level and this approach is not credible and instead becomes an expression of the dogmatic insistence on the necessity to develop mass struggle. It is not understood that the very influence of nationalism within the working class is undermining the possibility to develop activity based on the importance of the role of class interest.

The SWP deny the significance of the limitations in their approach and instead emphasise the adverse result of the general election because of the limitations of the campaigning of the Labour party: “There are elements about the Labour party campaign that Socialist Worker thinks could have been better. It should have been centred on mass rallies and major public events open to all. Instead there was a drive towards trying to implement a more “professional” approach, centred on canvassing.” (p2) This comment ignores the fact that the Labour party held many rallies and that canvassing is an important aspect of any election campaign. The most important problem was the views of the Labour party about Brexit. This point is understood by Smith but his approach is to try and reconcile a pro Brexit stance with the objective of socialism. He comments: “Brexit was a central issue. It has bitterly divided the working class, enabling a disgusting fraud like Johnson to posture as the friend of ordinary people against the elite.”(p2) This development was facilitated by the pro Remain position of the Labour party: “Over the last two years Labour has edged closer and closer to a Remain position and called for a second referendum.”(p2) “It was a major shift from its 2017 position of “Labour accepts the referendum result and we will seek to unite the country around a Brexit deal that works for every community in Britain.”(p2) “This new approach was disastrous. It alienated swathes of those who voted Leave. Labour’s vote fell on average by more than 10 percentage points in the most pro Leave areas – although it fell by more than six points in the most pro-Remain areas.” (p2) “The Lexit position of fighting for a workers Brexit was derided by many in Labour, but it was right.” (p2) This comment ignores the obvious fact that the Brexit standpoint became to be associated with Johnson and the Conservatives and that the Labour party was trying to unite Leave and Remain voters in terms of a compromise formulation. The problem that the Labour party had was that Leave and Remain voters were polarised around supporting what seemed to be intransigent and opposed standpoints. In this context the attempt to provide a united approach that could reconcile Leave and Remain voters was not likely to be successful. But this does not mean that the Labour party was wrong to try and promote a position of unity of what seemed to be contrasting viewpoints They were trying to unite the working class in terms of an approach that was attempting to recognise the concerns of both Leave and Remain supporters. If they had been successful, they could have generated the possibility of a united working class that would be able to develop its strength to oppose the populist appeal of the Tories. Instead of this principled understanding, Kimber advocates a workers Brexit, which would implicitly mean rejecting the concerns and interests of those people who supported the position of Remain. This approach could only have meant supporting one section of the working class against the other. But most importantly, Kimber does not outline what a workers’ Brexit would mean in terms of definite policies. Instead he seems to suggest that a left-wing Brexit is nothing more than accommodation to a nationalist sentiment that is connected to the advocacy of some left wing aims such as the improvement of the NHS. What this apparent assumption ignores is that the Conservatives under the leadership of Boris Johnson will always be able to promote nationalist aspirations more effectively than the Labour party and the various socialist organisations. Furthermore, Brexit is only credible as a conception of the role of the UK within the context of obtaining free market settlements with other countries like the USA. In this manner there is no satisfactory conception of what a left-wing Brexit would mean because the only progressive possibility in this context is for the UK to have a close relationship with the EU, such as involving membership of the Single Market and customs union. But this is the very relationship that is being rejected by the Conservatives and unfortunately this approach seems to be supported by the voters. In this context the only principled and progressive option was for the Labour party not to reject the option of Remain in an absolute manner. At the very least the Labour party was right to contend that the UK outside of the EU should still be connected to the Single Market and customs union. In contrast the SWP does not outline the details of what is meant by a workers’ Brexit. Does this mean the maintenance of the relations of the UK to the single market and customs union? Instead the conception of a workers’ Brexit is outlined as a slogan that has no details and is merely a sentiment that in some vague manner is related to the aspiration for socialism.

But instead of addressing what seems to be important problems the only perspective that the SWP advocates is that of the necessity of struggle: “A more fundamental problem is the low level of struggle in society. When people are involved in strikes, protests and demonstrations they gain a sense of collective unity. They are more open to radical ideas.” (p3) This point has general validity but it ignores the importance of the ideological issue that the very aspect of the role of nationalism undermines the possibility of developing class consciousness and militancy. A working class influenced by the populism of the Tories is less likely to become involved in struggles against the forces of capital. Instead activism is limited to the role of single-issue campaigners. This situation will not advance the possibility to transform society. But to the SWP the role of activism is an effective substitute for the complicated issues of politics and ideology. Furthermore, they utilise this perspective in order to conveniently indicate what is meant by a workers’ Brexit. Instead they justify their standpoint by an absolutist rejection of the importance of parliamentary politics and the issues that the House of Commons discusses and instead outline the advantages of a militant based politics for opposing the objectives of a Conservative government. But this perspective is one-sided because it ignores the important issue that the majority of people consider that the realisation of Brexit is the foremost question of the present. It is an urgent question that the forces of socialism and the Labour Party develop an understanding of what is meant by a principled form of Brexit under the present political conditions. We have to connect the character of Brexit with a close relationship to the Single Market and customs union and in that manner uphold the interests of workers and of society in general. In this manner the aims of the Conservatives with regards to Brexit have to be contested and challenged, and in this context support for the Labour party has to be promoted and generated. What is involved is the development of a counterhegemonic strategy that indicates a principled alternative to the Conservatives on the issue of Brexit. But it is the importance of this approach which is completely rejected by the SWP who instead promote the conception of a workers’ Brexit in the most ambiguous manner. The only explicit aspect of their approach is to advocate the importance of strikes and protests.

The position of the SWP is developed by Tomas Tengely-Evans in the article: “Boris Johnson is set for further battles” (Socialist Worker, 17th December 2019). He indicates the importance of talks between the EU and the UK government and suggests that they may not be successful. But this point is not elaborated in any satisfactory manner and instead the emphasis is on the importance of mass struggle in order to oppose the reactionary objectives of the Tory government. But what is not explained is how will mass struggles become generalised and effective if people are still under the influence of the populist ideology of the Conservatives? Instead In an additional article: “Start the Resistance now and keep building it till Johnson and the government are out” (Socialist Worker, December 17th 2019) this basic point is merely repeated. The call is rigidly made, in favour of mass actions and the issue of the complexities created by the present political situation in the UK are not addressed. But ultimately the SWP do provide some form of analysis of the issues involved in the present situation. In an article by Nick Clark: “Why Labour Lost the General Election”, (Socialist Worker, December 17th 2019) he comments that: “Labour lost the general election because Leave voters in its former seats thought it would betray them over Brexit.” (p1). Clark convincingly contends that the right wing Labour view that they should have argued more convincingly in favour of a Remain position was not credible. But he does not outline what should have been the principled character and details of a progressive Leave position. Instead what is outlined is the expression of discontent by many working class people about the policy concerning Brexit upheld by the Labour party but instead of addressing this issue and elaborating what would be meant by a left wing form of Brexit the conclusion is the usual generalisation about the limitations of the Labour party: “Labourism, the idea that Parliament comes first and must discipline everything else, is in the end the problem. Being trapped in a world view limited by Labour and its internal problems is catastrophic.” (p2). So, instead of outlining the precise character of an alternative on the issue of Brexit we have the usual and dogmatic advocacy of the necessity for a revolutionary party. This approach is a vague justification of the importance of the development of an understanding of a principled conception of Brexit. But the problem is that this perspective is not outlined in precise terms. Instead there is a vague emphasis on the importance of the discontent of the workers that led to an expression of the importance of the realisation of Brexit and the related necessity to vote for the Tories. But we are still no wiser about what a principled and progressive expression of Brexit would consist of. The major problem is that the aim of socialism is connected to the importance of internationalism which would imply the necessity of the unity of the working-class within the EU. In this context the rejection of the EU by the workers of the UK is an expression of alienation that lacks any genuine progressive political content. Hence it is difficult to develop a conception of what would be meant by a principled and socialist influenced understanding of the character of Brexit. However, despite these difficulties it is necessary to try and develop a socialist influenced understanding of Brexit, but this would not mean the rejection of the importance of the principles of internationalism. Instead we would have to develop support for the view that the UK should still have close relations with the EU and continued importance of connections to the single market and the customs union. This approach would be connected to the adherence of the principles of the free movement of labour. Instead of recognition of the importance of these types of objectives, the SWP glosses over the importance of discussion of these issues by the dogmatic emphasis on the necessity of the role of struggle. But the point is what should be the basis of the politics of this struggle? This is never outlined in terms of a programme because instead there is the dogmatic assumption that the workers who voted for the Conservatives will ultimately become disillusioned with the government and so become opposed to its aims and objectives. The assumption being made is that it is inevitable that the conditions for the revival of the class struggle will occur. But what should be the programme of this process of the development of mass action? This perspective is never outlined by the SWP writers; instead there is the dogmatic assumption that the policies of the Conservative government will generate forms of mass struggle and so this situation would imply that a programme of action is superfluous, and instead all that the revolutionary organisations need to do is to be cheerleaders of an inevitable development of mass struggle. In this context the SWP outlines the view that this struggle is already occurring in terms of various forms of protest and opposition to the government. But such superficial optimism ignores the inconvenient fact that these actions are the outcome of the role of a few dedicated activists and do not express the aspirations of the mass of the people who still support the government in an enthusiastic manner. The emphasis on the importance of activism by the SWP means that they have to ultimately deny the seriousness of the defeat of a Labour Party led by a left-wing leader. Instead, by denying the seriousness of the political situation the SWP can continue to advocate the importance of activism and in this context they over-estimate the importance of the actions of various pressure groups. In other words, they effectively deny the importance of the support of the Conservatives in previously loyal Labour Party voting areas. They formally acknowledge this fact but fail to understand its significance. The voters have rejected a left-wing reformist approach that was being promoted by the Labour Party leadership and instead adopted the standpoint of right-wing populism. This represents a dramatic undermining of the class consciousness of the majority of workers and the result can be the decline of the influence of left reformist ideas and their replacement by the approach of right-wing populism. Therefore, it is an urgent task for the Labour Party and Marxist organisations to develop an approach that can make socialism popular with the people. This means that an alternative to reactionary nationalism has to be elaborated and, in that manner, the issue of the popularity of the success of the Conservatives becomes tackled in serious terms. But the various articles of the SWP raise none of these issues because in a dogmatic and complacent manner they instead assume that the development of inevitable struggles will resolve these issues. This approach is an expression of the pragmatic importance of practice at the expense of the role of theory. Instead of this complacency we have to recognise that the recent failures of the Labour Party in the election also raises serious issues about the credibility of Marxism and its revolutionary approach. But the complacency of the SWP fails to acknowledge the importance of these issues.

The point being made is that the advocates of a Marxist standpoint have been unwilling to outline a coherent conception of the relation of nation to class. In particular there is a denial of the influence of nationalism within the working class, and instead what is being advocated is an abstract and rigid understanding of the premises of internationalism. This means that the supporters of the reactionary standpoint of capitalism are able to justify this standpoint in terms of the popular conception of the role of nation and this has been utilised in order to promote the policy of Brexit. The result of the influence of this perspective within the population of the UK has meant that the forces supporting socialism have been unable to develop a popular alternative to this justification of national chauvinism. The emphasis on the importance of class has not been able to provide a popular alternative to the apparent influence of the relationship of the nation to the aspirations of working- class people, and this point was proved in the recent election. The SWP and other organisations advocate a conception of left-wing Brexit, but nobody knows what this means and instead the only coherent conception of Brexit is that which is provided by the populist role of the Conservative Party. The result of this situation is that the working class in general terms has become a supporter of the approach of the Tories and the aspiration for socialism is reduced to an expression of the objectives of a few left-wing intellectuals. But given the popularity of Brexit it is necessary for the forces of socialism to outline what this should mean in terms of the realisation of the interests of the working class. This point has been recognised by Jeremy Corbyn who has begun to accept Brexit but has already combined this with criticism of the approach of Johnson. He has outlined the necessity of the importance of workers rights, environmental standards and the necessity to maintain close relations with the EU. But the problem is that the Conservatives majority in the House of Commons means that they are able to define the character and content of Brexit. This means the undermining of all aspects of the welfare state and the rejection of the interests of the workers and the environment. In this context it should be the task of socialists to define what we mean by a socialist conception of Brexit and connect this understanding to the maintenance of close relations between the UK and the EU. Hence, we should reject the end of the connection of the UK to the EU in terms of the ending of the role of the single market and customs union and instead advocate that this type of relationship be maintained. All of the aspects of the EU should be maintained in any trade deal between the EU and the UK. In contrast to this type of elaboration of the details of what would be a progressive type of Brexit, organisations like the SWP refuse to outline what they would mean by a workers’ Brexit, and instead this objective is being promoted in a vague manner. This type of vagueness has to be replaced by a collection of policies that would amount to what we as Marxists mean by a workers’ Brexit. In this context we have to accept that the option of remaining in the EU is no longer a principled possibility for the UK because of the views of the people, but this does not mean that it is not possible to advocate the closest possible relations between the UK and the EU. But in contrast to this type of clarity the SWP is content to uphold the conception of a left-wing Brexit in the most vague and dogmatic manner. They fail to outline what they would mean by a progressive Brexit, and instead are content to reject the approach of Remain in the most abstract terms. What is ignored by this type of criticism is that the major problem is that the majority of the working class has supported the Conservative understanding of Brexit, and this is why the Labour Party was defeated in the recent election. Therefore, it is a major task to outline and elaborate what should be the approach of a progressive form of Brexit and why this would be superior to the standpoint of the Conservatives. Instead of this standpoint the SWP is content to argue in terms of what might have been instead of recognising the tragedy of Corbyn’s failed attempt to unite Remain and Leave voters in a left-wing manner.

However, have recent events indicated that it was politically flawed to have a position on the EU referendum in 2016, and to critically advocate a remain standpoint? It was progressive and principled to advocate a remain position in relation to the 2016 referendum. This was because the EU represented the basis for the realisation of progressive social reforms and also enabled the development of international production and trade in terms of the role of the customs union and single market. In contrast to withdraw from the EU means that the role of capitalism can only be sustained by the most sustained undermining of the social conditions of the working class because the interests of capital cannot be upheld in any other manner in these circumstances. However once the referendum had occurred and a majority was obtained for a Leave position, the major task was to try and unite the working class against the promotion of a reactionary form of nationalism in terms of supporting the election of a Labour government that would try and implement a new negotiated deal with the EU which could be put to another referendum with the option of remain. However, this option has proved to be a failure in electoral terms and instead the people have expressed their view in favour of Brexit by the election of a populist Tory government. This has created a situation which socialists did not want and has created unfavourable conditions that mean that the situation has become defined by the forces of reactionary populism. In these circumstances the forces of socialism have to admit the seriousness of the defeat and adopt new tactics in order to try and unite the working class on the basis of the struggle for socialism. This means that we have to accept the validity of the sentiment to leave the EU, and to therefore make no more calls for a new referendum. Instead we have to adapt to the present unfavourable situation in the most principled manner, which means continuing to advocate the aims of socialism and internationalism in these unfavourable circumstances. This means that an important objective is to continue to advocate united solidarity between the workers of the UK and the EU. In this context we should not reject the importance of promoting the closest possible relations between the peoples of the UK and the EU, such as the continued relation of the UK to the customs union and single market of the EU. The Labour Members of Parliament should promote this approach within the House of Commons and try to obtain popular support for such an approach. In this manner the aim should be to reject the populist and conservative conception of a UK that has no connection with the EU. This standpoint represents the view of a fortress UK that can only be maintained in terms of the undermining of the conditions of the people of the UK. The result of this reactionary perspective will logically be the demise of all the continuing aspects of the welfare state. In this context the reactionary role of the Conservatives will recreate the political conditions for the Labour Party to reconnect with its presently alienated working-class areas. In these terms the possibility will occur favouring the Labour Party to win the next election. But this possibility will be undermined if the Labour Party chooses as its next leader a right-winger who is not prepared to lead struggles against the reactionary measures of the Conservative government. This is why the Labour party should choose as its next leader someone like Rebecca Long-Bailey who is a genuine left winger and will be prepared to continue the legacy of Jeremy Corbyn. In other words, the task is to reorient tactics under these new circumstances and to develop what should be a socialist form of Brexit. The aspirations of remain have been seriously undermined and effectively ended by the results of the recent general election. Instead we have to reorient to the new political circumstances and to modify our strategy and tactics accordingly. This process does not mean an adaptation to the reactionary aspects of nationalism but instead developing a new form of the struggle for socialism under what will be unfortunate political circumstances. This means accepting that a serious defeat has occurred and that it is necessary to adapt to what have become unfavourable political conditions. The most favourable outcome would be for the UK to still be part of the EU, but this has not proved to be possible because of the present reactionary situation. However, this does not mean that the forces of progressive opinion should reject the importance of the necessity of the UK maintaining a close relationship with the EU. The forces of left-wing opinion should strive to ensure that the measures of Parliament are based on standards that conform to the criteria established by the EU as in relation to workers rights and the environment. This development should be connected to agitation to ensure that the UK maintains a close relationship with the customs union and the single market. In this manner the character of Brexit is a progressive one that is based on the possibility to realise the interests of the working class in the most effective manner. Primarily the forces of progressive opinion should promote the view that the workers of the UK should have the closest possible political relations to the workers of the EU. The struggle to develop and realise a socialist Europe should still continue, but under the new conditions in which the UK is now not a member of the EU.

The point being made is that the influence of nationalism is what is undermining the ability to express and realise the interests of the workers of the UK in the most principled and effective manner. The result of this nationalist influence has been the election of a reactionary Tory government that has an agenda of undermining the interest of the people of the UK in order to uphold the domination of capital over labour. This development has the reactionary form of the expression of the role of a Bonapartist and populist administration that rules on behalf of capital with the passive support of large sections of the working class. Such a situation will only encourage the government to attempt to realise free market agreements with governments around the world in terms of the development of the end of the role of the public sector within the UK economy. It will be necessary for the Labour movement to oppose the attempt to realise reactionary measures and instead it should act to try and realise what could be defined as a left-wing form of Brexit. It is necessary for the Labour Party to engage with the working class in order to obtain its support for this approach. This means the necessity to develop an effective role in Parliament that is able to indicate the reactionary character of the measures of the Conservative government and how they are opposed to the interests of working people and the trade unions. On the basis of this consistent opposition to the actions of the Conservative government it will be able to develop new forms of popular support for the re-election of a left-wing Labour government in a few years. The point is that it is necessary for the forces of left- wing opinion not to become demoralised and disorientated and to instead unite in order to maintain the progressive character of the present Labour Party and to uphold a militant programme of action that can create the conditions for the possibility of the election of a Labour government in the next few years. This government would then have the mandate to establish close relations with the EU, even if the option of re-joining the EU has been ruled out by the views of the majority of the people.

However, this type of determination to regenerate the morale of the supporters of the Labour Party is not supported by the views of Mike Macnair in his article in the recent Weekly Worker. In his article ‘Corbynism is Over’ (WW, December 19th number 1280, p4) he argues that the prospect of the immediate attempt to form a labour government is not possible. This is a truism but this approach is based on the apparent perspective that the Labour Party should accept a long period of opposition in which the issue of re-election is not realistic: “The Labour left may survive the defeat; but it is most likely to do so if it accepts that what is on the agenda is the struggle for an opposition and a voice, not – until we have substantially rebuilt the movement – the immediate struggle for a government.” (p4). But this understanding seems to imply that the re-election of a Labour government is not possible, or even desirable in the next few years. Instead militant opposition should be the role of a left wing defined Labour Party. But the point that this effectively pessimistic standpoint seems to ignore is that the very process of opposition is to prepare the basis for the possibility of the re-election of the Labour Party at the next election. The reactionary measures of the present Tory administration will generate the possibility for the development of the popularity of the Labour Party which could create the conditions for the successful election of a Labour government. The point is that the convincing victory of the Conservatives at the present election should not generate pessimism about the prospects of the Labour Party at the next election. Instead it is necessary not to be demoralised and to reflect on how the popularity of the Labour Party can be re-created to the extent that it results in its possible successful election in the next few years. But the pessimism of Macnair is glossed over by the ultra-left perspective that what is necessary is the role of a communist party in order to overcome the political limitations of the Labour Party: “It is constitutional loyalism which lies behind Labour’s ‘governmental illness’, shared by left and right. To overcome the problem needs a disloyalist party, one which seeks in the long term to overthrow the constitution rather than play the constitutional game. That is – a communist party.” (p4). But the necessity to develop a communist party should not be to replace the Labour Party in a grandiose manner, but instead the generation of the influence of Marxism that would have an effect on the views of the members of the Labour Party. The point is to ensure that the influence of the views of people like Corbyn do not become undermined by the results of this election. In this context the perspective of the formation of a Marxist party is an abstraction unless it is connected to the development of its influence on the actions and character of the Labour Party. This view is not explicitly rejected by Macnair but his preference is obviously for the Communist party to become the most dynamic basis of a relation to the Labour Party. In this context the role of the Labour Party would be to defer to the Communist party which it has accepted as its ideological and political advisor. But this justification of a one-sided relationship is not likely to occur because of the actual problem of the continued lack of influence of Marxist organisations, which Macnair reluctantly accepts is because of the continued splits between what are rival organisations. Instead, it would seem to be more logical for the various groups to try and influence the Labour Party in terms of the promotion of policies that should become the basis of its approach such as the objective of workers’ management of the economy. Instead of this standpoint, Macnair outlines the approach of opposition to the present government and does not outline in coherent terms what is meant by this perspective. He seems to have ignored the obvious fact that the role of the Labour Party is to become the party of government and to create policies that will obtain the support of the electorate in a general election. In this context the role of opposition is not a preferred option but has instead been the result of the situation in which the Tories have won the majority of votes in the general election. Macnair justifies his stance by suggesting that it is possible in a situation of militant opposition to obtain concessions from a Tory government, whilst Labour governments have often justified reactionary policies. But the point is that this situation occurred under right wing Labour governments, whilst a Corbyn government would be a left-wing administration with a progressive agenda. It would be the task of left-wing forces to critically support this type of government and to advocate that it does seriously act to realise what is a left-wing election manifesto. The election of a Corbyn administration would have been an important victory for the working class, and so would have facilitated the possibility of implementing important reforms that could have altered the balance of power between capital and labour in the interests of the latter. But this possibility does not seem to have been recognised by Macnair who instead criticises the very aim of Corbyn to win a general election and comments: “Corbyn and his associates could only see a way forward through winning a general election and forming a government. The politics of effective long term opposition were beyond their ken – and remain beyond the horizon of most of the left.” (p4). But the point is that without this perspective the Labour Party would have no credibility with the electorate. It has to provide a potential programme of government at any election, and in this context the Labour manifesto had important progressive aspects which, if implemented, could have altered the balance of power within society in favour of working people. This point seems to be effectively ignored by Macnair who instead is concerned that the Labour Party should become a party of opposition. This perspective is dogmatic and ignores the connection of the Labour Party to the aim of winning parliamentary majorities and becoming a party of government. The actual primary issue is whether the Labour party has a right wing policy or adopts the alternative of genuine left wing policies.

Macnair also criticises what he considers to be the Remain standpoint of the Labour leadership. In actuality Corbyn tried to reconcile remain and leave supporters, and in relation to this issue the result was a noble failure. People did not understand his stance and as a result the chauvinist standpoint of Johnson obtained popular support. But this did not mean that Corbyn was wrong to try and unite remain and leave supporters in terms of the intention to unite people in support of the policies of the Labour Party. Nor does Macnair outline what should have been the alternative approach of the Labour Party, he is not in favour of Brexit or remain, and so his standpoint is an expression of confusion. This ambiguity is connected to the fact that the Weekly Worker do not like the role of referendums in principle and so this enables them to adopt what is a neutral position on the issue of membership of the EU by the UK. The point being made is that the failure of Corbyn to obtain popular support for his position did not mean that it was wrong for him to try and reconcile remain and leave supporters. But unfortunately, this issue became the basis of the propaganda view that Corbyn was reluctant to outline whether he was in favour of either leave or remain. This criticism was utilised in order to undermine the integrity and decisiveness of Corbyn, and this issue became the major aspect of the election. Ultimately the problem for the Labour Party was that remain voters were divided in loyalties between the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, whilst the supporters of Leave could unite in favour of the Conservatives. This situation was facilitated by the decision of the Brexit Party not to stand in Conservative seats. The various Left groups have criticised the Labour Party for not supporting a Brexit stance, but they fail to elaborate what this would mean. Indeed, there is the general illusion that the stance of pro-Brexit could be easily reconciled with the principles of socialist internationalism, although this approach is never outlined in satisfactory detail. The only coherent conception of what is meant by Brexit was promoted by a right wing Conservative Party, who vaguely promised to resolve the issue of Brexit and so they appealed for support by people who had become bewildered by the impasse in the House of Commons concerning this issue. The problem for the Labour Party was that it was under continual pressure of supporters of Remain to support a referendum, and so the fact that this was generally an unpopular position was ignored by the leadership of the Labour Party. This meant that the Labour Party became alienated from many of its possible supporters. Corbyn tried to address this issue but his approach only led to popular confusion about what it meant. As a result, the issue became about what was Corbyn’s stance on the EU, and this meant that the Labour party was on the defensive about this question. But instead of Corbyn’s admirable attempts to advocate a position that could unite people, the left groups only advocated support for Brexit in the vaguest manner They were under the illusion that people had a position of support for left wing views combined with adherence to Brexit. This understanding was an illusion; instead people became adherents to the Conservatives because they recognised that the Conservatives under the leadership of Johnson were firmly committed to Brexit. This is why they were prepared to vote for the Tories despite having previously been loyal Labour voters. The politics of nation became more important than what had been class loyalties. As a result, the Tories were able to gain what had been safe Labour seats. Corbyn could not do anything about this situation. Hence it would be wrong to blame Corbyn for what occurred because the appeal of patriotism proved to be popular given the situation of the creation of a populist Tory government. Ultimately the forces of socialism have to try and develop an understanding of the appeal of nationalism and try to create an alternative that is more popular. This should become the priority of the Labour Party to try and create a collection of policies that will be able to gain a victory at the next election. This does not mean diluting the appeal of socialism, but instead making this objective more relevant and important for the majority of the people. But these issues are ignored by Macnair’s almost complacent conception of the necessity of the Labour Party becoming a party of opposition.

In other words, the major issue that has to be addressed is the reactionary influence of nationalism which results in support by sections of the workers for the populist Conservative Party. In the abstract, the forces of Marxism have to develop more arguments in favour of the principles and aims of internationalism. But what does this mean under the present circumstances? The most important aspect of internationalism is the necessity to develop unity between the working class of the UK with the peoples of the EU, but this possibility has been undermined by the durability of the influence of scepticism within the UK about the advantages of being part of a common economic and political organisation. Furthermore, this issue has been complicated by the role of the referendum which decided to leave the EU. The aspirations of popular democracy were apparently in favour of the end of the economic and political relations of the UK with the EU. In this context there was no democratic mandate for the standpoint of remain. Furthermore, the attempt of Jeremy Corbyn to unite remain and leave supporters proved to be a failure. Indeed, his position was not understood. In these circumstances what seemed to be most influential was a reactionary form of nationalism that was opposed to the principles of international solidarity and was instead an assertion of British national chauvinism. This situation could not be challenged by the approach of most Marxist groups which was an accommodation to this populist nationalism in terms of the acceptance of a pro-Brexit position. It seems that the only basis to transform this situation is to patiently show that the populist nationalism being upheld by the Conservatives is not in the interests of the working class. The reactionary character of their politics will indicate that the only alternative is to support policies that are in the interests of the majority of the people within society, and in that manner the issue of the necessity for the socialist transformation of economic and political activity can be raised in what could potentially be a popular manner. But this process cannot be carried out in a successful manner without also indicating the importance of the UK to have a close relation to the EU in terms of being in the single market and customs union. It is necessary to challenge the Tory conception of Brexit and to outline and argue for an alternative. It is vital that the Conservative approach be shown to be about undermining the interests of the majority of society, and that instead the approach of socialism is about expressing the aspirations of the majority of society. This is why we need to elaborate what is meant by socialism and how it can be realised by the popular and participatory actions of the people. In this manner the process of attempting to challenge the ideological hegemony of the Conservatives will be initiated and developed. In these terms the basis to establish a majority for a left-wing Labour Party in the next election can be created.

However, there is also another complicating factor in this situation. The domination of the Scottish National Party in Scotland means that the character of politics in Scotland is increasingly not related to what is happening in England and Wales. This means the Conservative Party is able to realise a majority in Parliament by its domination of England. The Labour Party effectively no longer has an electoral presence in Scotland and this situation facilitates the ability of the Conservatives to establish a majority in Parliament. This situation is not changed by the Labour Party being opposed to a referendum on the issue of Scottish Independence. This situation should be changed in terms of support for a referendum, and acceptance of the right of Scotland to be an independent nation. But acceptance of this right does not mean that it should be advocated and the arguments for the continuation of a united UK could be shown to be in the interests of the working class in general. An important reason for the rejection of the realisation of Scottish independence is because such a situation can only facilitate the ability of the Tories to continue to have a majority in England and Wales. The democratic rights of the people of Scotland can be realised in the most effective manner if a left-wing Labour government is formed in the UK. This situation would ensure that the national aspirations of the people of Scotland are combined with the realisation of genuine social and economic equality within all of the UK. But this perspective does not mean that the actual result of a referendum in Scotland should be disregarded. If the people of Scotland vote in favour of independence, then this aspiration should be supported by the labour movement in what has become a new type of state of the UK.

The above challenges have to be tackled if the possibility of a Labour government is to be realised at the next election. However, it is also necessary to reject the fashionable view that has emerged on the Marxist left that Jeremy Corbyn proved to be a political failure. (This opinion has been expressed in the letter pages of Weekly Worker). Instead Corbyn tried in a principled manner to promote a radical manifesto, and to also advocate a policy that would try to unite the supporters of a remain and leave position in relation to Brexit. He failed in this task, but this does not mean that his efforts were not admirable or futile. Instead he has to be congratulated for a generally left-wing approach, and it was the task of Marxists to provide critical support for a Corbyn led Labour Party. He was defeated at the election because of the influence of populist nationalism and the role of the media in portraying him as indecisive and ineffectual. The task now is to support the election of another principled left winger as leader of the Labour Party and to continue the task of the promotion of socialist aims. The ultimate error would be to elect a right winger as the leader of the Labour Party. Such a possibility can only undermine the potential to obtain the support of working people within the UK for the task of the creation of socialism in national and international terms.