WHY WE STILL NEED A MARXIST PARTY

The overwhelming victory of Jeremy Corbyn in the recent Labour Party leadership election would suggest that the political role of Marxists in the UK is to simply join and organise within this organisation. However, this conclusion would be to ignore the fact that the LP is still an organisation primarily orientated to winning elections, and it is still based on accommodation to capitalism rather than opposing this system and promoting the task of the revolutionary transformation of society. The opposition between the Parliamentary Labour Party and Corbyn indicated that he was an isolated figure, but this situation has changed with his renewed electoral mandate. This new situation provides encouragement that stalemate within the LP is over, but we still need a Marxist party that is able to advocate the possibility of revolutionary change. The Marxist party would be a crucial independent voice elaborating the reasons why the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, and the election of a left-wing Labour Party, is not sufficient if the successful socialist transformation of society is to be realised. Lenin outlined in his 'Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder' that Communists should encourage the process of the election of the Labour government. (1) But they should retain their independent revolutionary voice.

Consequently we should also establish in what manner the Corbyn government would be limited and inadequate in relation to the task of advancing the cause of socialism. For example, it will be reluctant to support the development of workers councils and mass organisations that promote the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society. Instead it will seek to realise the improvement of society by means of the role of Parliament. The importance of a Communist Party will be vital in order to outline how this reformist action is inadequate from the viewpoint of the realisation of socialism. This practical task should be accompanied by a vital theoretical analysis which suggests that the Labour party is unable to conceive of a future society in a manner which suggests the necessity of a break with capitalism. It is precisely because the Labour party is not a revolutionary party, and never can be, which suggests that it is unlikely to advocate the revolutionary replacement of capitalism with socialism. Only a principled Marxist party will developing this understanding of the limitations of a left-wing Labour government because its world view is based on the perspective of proletarian revolution: “Criticism – the most keen, ruthless and uncompromising criticism – should be directed, not against parliamentarianism or parliamentary activities, but against those leaders who are unable – and still more against those that are unwilling – to utilise parliamentary elections and the parliamentary rostrum in a revolutionary and communist manner. Only such criticism – combined, of course, with the dismissal of incapable leaders and their replacement by capable ones – will constitute useful and fruitful and revolutionary work that will simultaneously train the “leaders” to be worthy of the working class and of all working people, and train the masses to be able properly to understand the political situation and the often very complicated and intricate tasks that spring from that situation.”(2)

In relation to the present, the task of the Communist Party will be to both support the election of a left-wing Labour government, and also not neglect criticism that would indicate its limitations in relation to the task of realising socialism. The Labour Party – in its theory and practice – does not support the revolutionary principles connected to the task of overcoming the domination of capital within society. This understanding does not rule out the possibility that the Labour party could become revolutionary, but under normal circumstances, even with a left-wing leader, the LP is unlikely to be transformed in Marxist terms. Indeed the history of Social Democracy has indicated that this political formation has adapted to capitalism, even supporting the offensive of capital against labour, rather than upholding the opposite perspective of striving to promote the revolutionary demise of capitalism. However, despite this dismal record, Marxism aspires to generate its influence within the Social Democratic organisation and to establish support for a revolutionary strategy. This task can be advanced because of the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party. Hence we consider that it may be tactical advisable for Marxists to join the Labour Party. But the political limitations of the LP mean that it is unlikely – not impossible – that it will replace the role of a revolutionary party in relation to the strategic task of promoting an offensive for socialism. An important reason why the LP has not consistently supported the aim of socialism is because it does not recognise the importance of revolutionary change in order to realise this aim. Hence it has historically accommodated to capitalism as the 'democratic' alternative to the apparently elitist logic of a revolution led by a Bolshevik type party. Corbyn attempts to reconcile Marxism and reformism with his vague conception of a radical and participatory society. This ambiguity also indicates that he also considers socialism to be an ambitious aim that should be moderated with more 'realistic' aspects. The result is caring capitalism, which may mean more nationalisation and better public services, but it would not end the domination of capital over labour. To be precise what is being advocated is state capitalism similar to the type of society being developed by the Labour government of 1945-51. The major problem with this vision is that the realisation of this type of society would always be susceptible to being undermined by the imperatives of capital. The onset of capitalist crisis would end the era of reforms. Hence the only possibility to ensure that the progressive modification of capitalism is not temporary is to strive to realise socialism – or the end of the domination of capital over labour. But if this task is to be accomplished we need a Marxist party. Only this type of party is dedicated to the realisation of the tasks that are necessary in order to end the alienating influence of capital. This party aims to develop a revolutionary consciousness within the working class, or acts to develop popular support for a socialist offensive. History does not suggest that the LP can replace this principled role of a Marxist party.

The 'Labour Party Marxists' grouping beg to differ. They propose a constitutional basis that implies the LP could become a revolutionary party. They suggest that the LP adopts objectives which include: “Labour is the federal party of the working class. We strive to bring all trade unions, co-operatives, socialist societies and left-wing groups and parties under our banner.”(3) The problem with this formulation is that it does not maintain the political independence of the left-wing groups. What would be preferable would be the right of affiliation on the basis of the ability to propagate their own programmes. Also the view that the LP is the party of the working class implies its hegemonic role in realising socialism. This claim can only be proved in practice if the LP convincingly acts to advance the aims of socialism. Hence only the future relationship of the LP to the mass struggle for socialism can 'prove' that it truly is a principled political organisation and not an effective instrument in undermining the possibility to replace the domination of capital with that of labour. In this context, the second objective: “Labour is committed to replacing the rule of capital with that of the working class” is an aim that the LP has never previously supported.(4) The logic of this proposition is that if it was to be adopted it would indicate that the LP was definitely changing in a Marxist direction. However, this objective is also connected to confusing the characteristics of socialism with those of communism. The precise definition by Labour Party Marxists about socialism as a democratic planned economy is conflated with the prediction that society can become stateless, classless and without money. These aspects can only be realised in a communist society and are not likely in relation to the lower form of society of socialism. In my opinion the concept of a society without a state or form of authority is also optimistic, and money will be difficult to abolish.

However, the third objective makes welcome reference to the aim of a single chamber Parliament, proportional representation and annual elections. But the fourth objective is vague: “Labour seeks to win the active backing of the majority of the people and form a government on this basis.”(5) Will this aim be achieved in Parliamentary terms, or by the utilisation of different forms of political activity such as Soviets? The ambiguity of this point indicates that the Labour Party Marxists are trying to gloss over the importance of the reformist and Parliamentary past of the LP. Their answer is to develop a formula that attempts to provide an alternative to the reformist or revolutionary standpoint. Hence what they are denying is that the LP will only consider that acceptable political change can come about in Parliamentary terms. In contrast, it is a revolutionary Marxist who would suggest that the role of different types of popular sovereignty are also legitimate, and indeed are a more effective basis to indicate the opinions of the people. This vagueness of the views of LP Marxists indicates that the tense relations between the conflicting claims of the Constituent Assembly and the Soviet may never be resolved. It could be argued that it is the obligation of the Marxist – but not the typical LP member - to argue in favour of the Soviet. Hence the tensions within the attempts of the Labour Party Marxists to develop objectives that are acceptable to both LP members and Marxists are an indication that we need an independent Marxist party. Only this independent type of organisation can advocate a revolutionary programme. This observation does not mean that we should deny the importance of changes within the LP, but it is Marxism which can primarily develop a principled strategy of change and encourage a perceptive understanding of capitalism and the possibilities for socialism.

However, John McDonnell would dispute this conclusion. He would regard his recently announced economic programme at the Labour Party conference as an expression of the possibility of socialism. He suggested that the introduction of regional investment banks to promote company investment, improvements to the minimum wage, abolition of Tory trade unions laws, the development of workers co-operatives, and trade union representatives on company boards, would express the possibility to advance the cause of socialism. He also provided a commitment to the European single market and the aim of the creation of a progressive EU. To the extent that this collection of policies if implemented would represent an improvement in the material conditions of the working class, and an enhancement of the social power of working people, we can support this programme. However we must be explicit: if this programme of increased state intervention, and greater involvement of the trade unions within the economy, is implemented it would mean the creation of a contradictory form of state capitalism. The options would be either regression to the more completed domination of capital over the economy, or revolutionary advance towards socialism and the end of the influence of capital within the relations of production. It is at this very moment which requires decisive leadership and determination to oppose the role of capital within the economy which will produce uncertainty within the Labour Party and trade unions. This is because the development of state capitalism is their actual aim and as a result they will try to reconcile the opposing interests of capital and labour. Only committed Marxists will argue in the most intransigent manner to the effect that state capitalism is not satisfactory. We will argue that it is still necessary to realise socialism based on workers control of production and the introduction of a democratically planned economy. At this moment, the Labour Party will have an important decision to make: does it support revolutionary advance and the development of a mass movement for socialism; or does it attempt to reconcile the interests of capital and labour. McDonnell hinted his preference for this option with his talk of encouraging the entrepreneurial spirit alongside the role of labour. In contrast to this dithering Marxists will promote the aim of completing the revolutionary transformation of society.

However, despite this criticism, it would be sectarian to reject the new economic policy of the LP because of its contradictions and limitations. Instead we should acknowledge that the implementation of this programme, which would be based on the democratic involvement of working people, could result in a situation where the balance of class forces was in favour of advance towards socialism. Hence we should argue that the new economic policy of the LP should be implemented on the basis of the utilisation of the most militant methods. However, we are aware that the realisation of state capitalism can only be a temporary situation. It will still be necessary to advocate the completion of a revolutionary process that results in the end of the domination of capital over labour. This development requires the role of extra-Parliamentary methods, which the LP may be reluctant to support. In other words, only Marxism can uphold a revolutionary approach as against the limitations of left reformism. This point is not motivated by sectarian concerns because we would aim to generate unity of Marxism and left reformists around the recognition of the practical credibility of a revolutionary programme of action. This possibility is encouraged by the fact that the new LP leadership is determined to transform society and bring about a situation of greater equality and an end to poverty and low expectations. What Marxists need to outline is that the realisation of the LP programme in the most convincing manner requires the effective transformation of society, which means an end to the domination of capital over labour, and the development of a socialist society based on workers management of the economy.

In his speech to the LP conference, Jeremy Corbyn obviously felt vindicated by his second leadership victory. He also outlined a radical programme of municipal socialism, the role of a National Investment Bank, and the intervention of the state in order to promote the importance of equality, economic efficiency and the improvement of public services. He also outlined how the task of the LP was to convince BREXIT supporters that migrants are not to blame for declining public services and low wages. This viewpoint is supportable, but Corbyn's major problem is in trying to convince big business that an economy based on state intervention and tackling tax avoidance is also in their interest. Hence the problem with his standpoint is that he makes an appeal to a national interest, and believes that it is possible to obtain the support of capital for his aim of economic growth and efficiency. The point that is glossed over by Corbyn is that the forces of capital support the Tories because they introduce the measures that will generate a low wage and high profit economy. Thus it is naïve to believe that the multinationals could become the supporters of a radical interventionism of a left wing Labour government. Instead if a Labour government is elected with popular support, which will require a massive change in consciousness, then the situation will be created for the intensification of class contradictions. In this situation the appeal made to promote a supposed national interest will be completely undermined. The capitalists will resent workers representatives on company boards, whilst workers will have higher expectations about the possibility to improve conditions in the workplaces and within society. In this situation the choice will be either the capitulation of the Labour government because of the pressure of capital, or alternatively advance towards the prospect of transition to a socialist society. History suggests that all reformist governments accept the continued domination of capital because of their opposition to the revolutionary transformation of society. This is precisely why we need to develop an effective Marxist party that can agitate in favour of socialism and rejection of any surrender to the forces of capital.

However the first task is to achieve an electoral victory for the Labour Party. This will mean undermining the nationalism that has undermined the class consciousness within the British working class. Corbyn has established a good example by his refusal to blame migrants for poor social conditions and his tentative acceptance of the principle of free movement of labour. Furthermore, the LP leadership has put forward a progressive economic plan which deserves critical support from Marxists. If this plan was implemented it would mean the balance of class forces had shifted in favour of the possibility of transition to socialism. However, Marxism would have a continued vital role in attempting to ensure that the reformist character of the LP does not mean accommodation to capital occurs rather than the realisation of the proposed economic plan. Thus we need an independent voice outside the LP that maintains an intransigent position, and therefore argues reforms are not sufficient and that genuine progress can only be made with the revolutionary transformation of society. Hence the radicalism of the present LP does not mean the irrelevance of Marxism. Instead the continued importance of Marxism is more vital today than ever before.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Lenin: Left-wing Communism – An Infantile Disorder, Collected Works volume 31 Progress Publishers, Moscow 1966 p17-118

(2) ibid p65

(3)Labour Party Marxists: 'Objectives' in Weekly Worker no 1123, September 22nd 2016 p7

(4) ibid p7

(5) ibid p7