WHAT IS THE SIGNIFIACNCE OF A JEREMY CORBYN VICTORY IN THE LABOUR LEADERSHIP CONTEST? BY Phil Sharpe

The following comments are made in the spirit of support for the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party. It is necessary to be critical of those Marxists that are indifferent to the prospect of the possible victory of Corbyn, such as the Socialist Party and the SWP. But it also necessary to be critical of the sections of the Marxist left that regard his victory as being almost certain and are also adamant that this will result in the transformation of the Labour Party and British politics. For example, Jack Conrad suggests: “A Corbyn victory would shift the centre of political gravity in Britain radically to the left and give focus to simmering working class discontent.”(1) This comment is flawed because it firstly, underestimates the possibility that Labour party members will ultimately vote for a ‘safety first candidate’ and so prevent the victory of Corbyn. Secondly, the possible victory of Corbyn has not been based on the development of a mass movement of support and instead is connected to the anger of atomised individuals. The poor quality of the other leadership candidates has also promoted the advance of Corbyn. Thus it is possible that the election of Corbyn will not transform the Labour Party unlike the potential of the Bennite movement in the 1980’s. Instead we have the prospect of Corbyn presiding like a Bonaparte over the Labour party that remains right wing and opposed to socialist values and aims.

However the impact of a Corbyn victory cannot be underestimated. It would increase the confidence of the left-wing of the LP, and therefor result in the promotion of a left-wing agenda, and any new member of the LP would know that they were joining a party that had a left-wing leader and so could expect moves to be made that would undermine the continued right-wing character of the LP. Nevertheless the election of Corbyn would not immediately modify the bourgeois character of the LP. As we outlined in previous articles the reactionary transformation of the LP has been a protracted process and has resulted in the creation of a political organisation based on the programme of the promotion of the market and global capitalism. This is why it has not been unexpected that the LP has supported in Parliament the welfare measures of George Osbourne. The election of Corbyn would create the potential – but only the potential – to challenge this situation. In order for promise to become reality requires a political struggle that aimed to end the right-wing domination of the LP. If this struggle was serious and was not based on compromises, and the dilution of left-wing policy on the issue of opposing austerity, the logical conclusion would be for a split with the right wing. It is not possible to reconcile pro market politics with any standpoint that is based on anti-capitalism, and instead the importance of this contradiction would mean either a Corbyn capitulation to the right wing in the name of unity or else struggle for the ‘soul’ of the LP.

However, Conrad underestimates the importance of this struggle because he can only envisage victory of the left: “Yet despite having many criticisms we unhesitatingly want a thumping Corbyn majority. It would trigger a civil war in the Labour Party and yes, shift politics in Britain to the left.”(2) This dogmatic comment not only considers the victory of Corbyn as inevitable it also implies that the triumph of the left over the right-wing as an inexorable expression of this result. This perspective is an illusion. Despite the possibility of the victory of Corbyn the right wing of the LP would retain dominance within Parliament and the constituency parties. Only the most intransigent struggle would ensure that this situation meant the creation of left-wing hegemony. In order for this prospect to happen the left wing has to be prepared to split with the right. This might not happen. Instead the right-wing may be prepared to accept the leadership of Corbyn if he accepts the dilution of his policies. He may accept this proposal for resolution of party disputes in the name of unity. In this instance the bourgeois character of the LP would remain because of the effective neutralisation of the left wing. The point being made is that Corbyn is susceptible to this compromise because he lacks adherence of a principled programme of democratic socialism that could represent an alternative to the pro market position of the contemporary LP. Instead he upholds protest politics that does not represent an intransigent alternative to the support for capitalism upheld by the Parliamentary LP. In the name of party unity he may be prepared to dilute the objectives and aims of the left-wing.

Instead of recognition of these possibilities, Conrad can only envisage the revolutionary transformation of the LP: “Labour needs to be refounded on the basis of an explicitly socialist, as opposed to a Fabian programme. Then the Labour Party can, yes, become an organisation which ‘agitates, educates and organises’ for the revolutionary transition from capitalism to socialism.”(3) What this strategy glosses over is that the left wing of the LP does not generally support this approach and is instead dedicated to the realisation of a collection of anti-capitalist politics. It is doubtful that they support even the Bennite vision of democratic socialism. Hence the election of Corbyn as leader will not automatically advance the transformation of the LP into becoming a political expression of the aim of revolution and socialism. Instead the aim of Corbyn supporters will be the election of the LP leader on the basis of a more left-wing reformist programme, which may include limited nationalisation and defence of the welfare state. In other words what is likely with the election of Corbyn as party leader is the re-affirmation of traditional Social Democratic values and the attempt to reject the approach of New Labour. This possibility would not mean the transformation of the LP into a revolutionary organisation. Indeed the very ability to advocate a traditional Social Democratic policy would be a victory for the Left wing given the opposition of the right-wing to any attempt to reject the approach of New Labour. If the left wing was seriously committed to democratic socialism it would have to be prepared to split with the right-wing. Given its historical record it is likely to prefer compromise and the affirmation of party unity. Consequently, Conrad’s views about the transformation of the LP would be shown to be pure fantasy.

Let us outline the strategy of Conrad in detail: “So it is not enough – nowhere near enough – to get Corbyn elected or even bring forward the day when the Blairites and pro-capitalists are driven out. The Labour Party and the entire labour movement must be politically rearmed and thoroughly democratised. We want to make Labour into a common home for all workers and working class organisations- the goal of the founders of the party in 1900. A goal we should get Corbyn and his campaign to openly espouse.”(4) This perspective is false because it is based not on what we would consider to be the likely development based on consideration of past experience, and instead represents a projection of the illusions of Conrad into a strategic approach. It is flawed because it is very unlikely that the left wing will attempt to conduct political and ideological struggle with the right-wing. Instead it is more likely that the right-wing will go onto the offensive in order to undermine the stability and legitimacy of the Corbyn leadership. If the left wing achieves some semblance of party unity on their terms this will mean the dilution of policy, such as the rejection of nationalisation, and repudiation of any suggestion of socialism. The dilemma that the left-wing has is that any serious struggle with the right-wing will mean the undermining of the LP as an electoral force. This is why Corbyn, as leader, will possibly attempt to realise conciliation between the right and left in order to maintain the parliamentary ambitions of the LP. In contrast, the view that the election of Corbyn as leader will inevitably lead to a struggle with the right –wing for the soul of the LP, is unlikely. If this struggle does take place it will be because the right-wing is not content with Corbyn as leader and will be trying to undermine his position. Such a possibility could occur because of the fragile and weak position of the left wing within the LP. In other words the prospects favour the right-wing regaining ascendency over the LP, and the aim of its democratic transformation will be in tatters. Only if the left-wing was truly prepared to break with the right wing would the prospect of the democratic development of the LP become an actuality. But for the reasons given this is unlikely. The point is that the left wing does not have a principled programme that would provide any urgency for a break with the right wing. Instead it aims to obtain right wing acceptance of the return to the Social Democratic values of the 1960’s and 1970’s. The Bennite approach is quietly rejected and instead the aim of the left wing is reduced to defence of the welfare state. Hence the hope is that the right wing can accept these limited objectives and therefore compromise with any possible Corbyn leadership of the LP.

Consequently the aims of Conrad are shown to be ludicrous. The dynamic of change that will result in the creation of the LP as democratic and socialist is not likely to happen. Indeed it is not an insignificant matter that Corbyn does not share these aims and instead he will attempt to unite the LP around a traditional Social Democratic approach. Conrad argues that to reject the view that the LP can be an agency of socialism is to accommodate to pessimism. Instead we are being realistic about its balance of internal forces and the fact that the LP has been re-shaped by its Blairite experience. Thus the LP is not a bourgeois workers party that is amenable to trade union influence, and is instead a bourgeois party with a Social Democratic left wing. This wing may have an unexpected victory in the LP leadership contest but it will not alter the political character of the LP. Instead the left wing will seek to resolve the tensions and contradictions of this unstable political formation by means of concessions and the attempt to obtain generalised support for the policy of defence of the welfare state. In this context the expectations of the revolutionary left will be disappointed. Contrary to Conrad’s expectations the LP under Corbyn’s leadership will not necessarily become the supporter of trade union struggles and the promoter of militant action. Instead it will seek to gain re-election and defeat the Conservative government on the basis of its policy of defence of the welfare state.

Conrad argues that the LP is a bourgeois workers party because of the role of the trade unions. This is an illusion because of the fact that the LP is defined not by its passive organisational relations but instead by the relationship between its character and policy. This means the LP is an expression of its pro market standpoint and effective rejection of the traditional approach of Social Democracy based on support for reforms and the welfare state. The election of Corbyn as leader would not alter this character of the LP but it would create instability and uncertainty. The right wing in this situation would aim to destabilise Corbyn. The left wing response would be to reconcile the standpoint of the market with the welfare state, and so reject any suggestion of democratic socialism. This situation would indicate that the LP was still bourgeois in relation to its policy despite modifications and the apparent return to the values of Social Democracy. Only if these concessions did not satisfy the right wing would civil war occur within the LP. The point is that conciliation between the right wing and left wing is possible because the left have effectively rejected the Bennite programme of democratic socialism of the 1980’s. The left accept the continuation of capitalism even if they also call for its reform by the maintaining of the welfare state. The right wing can accommodate to this standpoint despite their present acceptance of the anti-austerity measures of Osbourne. Hence what upsets the right wing is not the left wing stance of Corbyn, rather they are concerned about the electoral legitimacy of the LP.

Ultimately, Conrad himself is not very confident about his assertions concerning the transformation of the LP. Hence he emphasises the necessity of the revolutionary groups to join the LP if change is to occur: “All socialist and communist groups, left-wing and progressive campaigns ought to be allowed to affiliate. Towards that end, given the first opportunity, all the undemocratic bans and prescriptions must be rescinded. A whole raft of new affiliated socialist and other such organisations would not only bring thousands of new recruits: it would bring in many men and women of talent. The culture of the Labour Party could that way be greatly enhanced.”(5) This is unlikely to happen because the right wing and left wing of the LP have a common vested interest in undermining any prospect of the revolutionary transformation of the LP. The left wing does not want to be challenged by a new and more militant left wing. Whilst the right wing also rejects the influence of Marxism as a return to the 1980’s. The point is that there is an immense political divide between the left wing of the LP and those that still uphold the revolutionary approach of Marxism. This divide is not just about reform versus revolution and instead the difference has widened to become connected to support for capitalism as against socialism. The radicalism of Corbyn does not disguise this difference.

However, despite what has been said in the above part of the article it is possible that the right-wing of the LP may wage civil war against the election of Corbyn as leader because of the undermining of their prestige and influence. In these circumstances it would be the obligation of the Marxist left to join the LP in order to bolster the intransigence of the left wing in favour of waging a principled struggle in order to bring about a split with the right-wing. The aim of the Marxists would be to transform a situation concerning the election of the Labour leader into being the expression of the opposition between support for capitalism or socialism. In this context the revolutionary left would attempt to convince the left wing of the LP that their defence of the welfare state represented inadequate and defensive politics and was not a principled alternative to the pro market standpoint of the right-wing. In this context the organisational issue would be between the continuation of the LP as a bourgeois formation or its transformation into a socialist party. However this perspective could only become credible and realistic if the left wing was prepared to oppose the influence of the right wing. Any conciliation of the right-wing by the left wing would mean the changes within the LP were limited and did not dramatically transform the political situation. Thus the transformation of the LP is dependent on the actions of the right-wing, the attitudes of the left wing, and whether opportunities are created for principled revolutionary intervention. Historical experience would seem to indicate that this perspective is presently optimistic, and that some form of reconciliation between right wing and left wing is more likely if Corbyn is elected leader of the LP.

It is also necessary to establish that the entrist type of Marxist left intervention of the 1970s and 1980’s is unacceptable. This intervention was often unprincipled and undermined the attempt to explain Marxist politics. Any Marxist relationship to the LP in the present should be based on the explicit propagation of the politics of socialism and the justification of opposition to the historical role of the LP. Marxists should also make it clear that they intend to uphold the undermining of the influence of the right wing of the LP and intend to promote the transformation of this organisation. If this opportunity is undermined by the reassertion of the influence of the right wing then the Marxists should assess what should be their course of action. It is important to recognise that any intervention by Marxists within the LP is dependent on its development. Hence the reconciliation of the left wing and right wing of the LP would make any suggestion of intervention an expression of unprincipled politics.

Jeremy Corbyn has recently proposed the revision of clause 4 in order to promote the possibility of the nationalisation of the basic utilities. This suggestion has been opposed by the other leadership contenders. However, what is needed in order to truly transform the LP is not ideas about specific policy and instead there should be discussion about the character and aims of the organisation. In this context Corbyn’s other idea about elaborating a statement of intent would be more important and principled. This process would enable an emphatic rejection of the concept of New Labour to be outlined alongside an understanding of what is meant by democratic socialism in the era of globalisation. Specifically, this would mean that the role of the LP in Parliament would be to advance the cause of socialism and this aim would be defined in terms of the realisation of the principles of co-operation, solidarity, social ownership and the ability to establish a society based on common purpose. This standpoint would be in contrast to New Labour’s reconciliation of social justice with the role of the market and support for limited state intervention in the activity of the economy. Discussion about these two competing visions of society would establish what type of LP is desired by its members and supporters. This process of demarcation would also establish the true balance of forces within the LP. If support for the approach of democratic socialism was in the minority this would indicate that the adherents of New Labour were still in a majority. This situation may also be reflected in terms of the defeat of Corbyn’s attempt to become the leader of the LP. What would be opportunist in comparison to discussion about principles would be negotiation about policy between the left wing and right wing. This latter course would indicate that the left wing was trying to reconcile its standpoint with that of the right wing. Instead of an unprincipled attempt to uphold party unity the left wing needs to establish a distinct position in terms of elaborating a statement of intent.

In other words the elaboration of an emphatic conception of democratic socialism would imply that the left wing was not satisfied with the modification of capitalism, via the role of the welfare state and the nationalisation of some basic industries. Instead it envisaged reform as being part of a process of movement towards the transformation of society in terms of the replacement of the profit motive of capitalism with the principles of need and equality. This would mean that the left wing was not satisfied with a return to the social democratic principles of the period before Kinnock and Blair, and instead supported a contemporary version of the Bennite programme of democratic socialism. However, at present Corbyn has not outlined his views on these issues in a coherent manner and instead vaguely implies he is in favour of the approach of ‘Old Labour’. But the Old Labour of 1945-51 actually established a mixed economy and lacked any perspective to advance socialism. They were also suspicious of the role of popular democracy, and opposed strikes and the actions of local communities trying to improve social conditions. In contrast, Benn broke with this Labourism and instead proposed a principled strategy of change via the role of Parliament and militant direct democracy. If Corbyn is to be a genuinely adherent of left-wing politics he needs to advocate this approach in a contemporary form and in this manner establish a principled break with New Labour. Instead his standpoint is that of protest politics, and his conception of opposition to austerity is not related to the aim of socialism. Furthermore, the revolutionary left have not challenged his lack of a socialist perspective. Instead they are concerned to transform the LP in organisational terms into a revolutionary party. This aim is an illusion because the central concern of the LP is with winning elections. But what we can advocate is that the LP adopt the standpoint of democratic socialism, which can then become part of the process of the realisation of overcoming the domination of capitalism.

At present Corbyn seems to vacillate between a position of negotiating with the right wing in terms of accepting a more left wing LP and rejecting this type of compromise. The revolutionary left should advocate that he favours the latter approach in terms of outlining a statement of intent that has the explicit aim of socialism. This aim should be elaborated in terms of aims and principles, and therefore the ideology of neoliberalism – the ideology of New Labour – should be rejected. Consequently an ideological struggle should begin that is about the character of the LP. Is the LP an agency of support for global capitalism or advocates the alternative of democratic socialism? If this struggle is not carried out then the victory of Corbyn may be superficial because the result will be a tendency towards compromise between the left wing and right wing of the LP. There are already indications that Corbyn would favour this latter course, and he is reluctant to outline his views about alternatives to capitalism. He knows what he is against, and he favours the welfare state, but he seems to lack any greater ambitions. The right wing of the LP still consider him as being dogmatic but they have not rejected working with him if he is elected. Only Blair has expressed outright opposition to a LP led by Corbyn. The role of the revolutionary left should be to promote the transformation of this leadership contest into a debate about what is the LP, and what does it stand for? The LP that adapts to the Conservative Party is obviously unprincipled and inadequate, but what is the alternative? We should encourage discussion about the relationship of the LP with socialism, and therefore indicate that this should be the defining issue related to the prospect for a Corbyn election as leader. In contrast the tendency for compromise between right wing and left wing will only generate a LP that accepts the capitalist system. This standpoint is not opposed by Corbyn’s call for more nationalisation. We do not want Old Labour, or New Labour, instead we want a LP that is more than an election machine. This means that the LP should be prepared to support the development of a mass movement against austerity and promotes the possibility of this struggle acquiring socialist objectives. What is being advocated is not the rejection of the role of the LP for winning elections but instead the recognition of the importance of popular democracy if socialism is to be realised, as Ralph Miliband explains: “Thus conceived, socialism is part of the struggle for the deepening and extension of democracy in all areas of life. Its advance is not inscribed in some pre-ordained historical process, but is the result of a constant pressure from below for the enlargement of democratic rights; and this pressure is itself based on the fact that the vast majority located at the lower ends of the social pyramid needs these rights if those who compose it are to resist and limit the power to which they are subjected.”(6)

Thus what is at stake in the Labour leadership election is the potential for the LP to be transformed from a bourgeois organisation that uncritically advocates neoliberalism into an organisation that upholds the strategy and aims of democratic socialism. It is quite possible that this potential will not be realised because the standpoint of upholding socialism is not the priority of Corbyn. Instead he wants to be elected leader of the LP in terms of more militant opposition to the Conservative government which means more principled defence of the welfare state. Consequently it is necessary for the supporters of Corbyn within the LP to act more effectively then atomised individuals and become a collective force that can put socialism onto the agenda. This task is still undermined by the ideological discrediting of socialism with the demise of the USSR and the changes in Eastern Europe. Thus the perspective of socialism has been transformed into a defensive ideology in terms of we know what we are against but have difficulty in explaining what we support. Corbyn shares this problem and so his standpoint can be defined as defence of the welfare state. It is necessary to provide reasons for socialism in order that the leadership contest becomes about issues of political philosophy and not the ambitions of any individual. Instead the revolutionary left has become crudely divided into two camps, those that favour the election of Corbyn, and those that profess indifference. Instead of this limited approach we need to transform the election into an issue about what is meant by socialism, and why should the LP support it? Only in this manner can the transformation of the LP into an agency for socialism make progress. There is much more at stake than the election of Corbyn as leader of the LP.

This argument does not mean the prospects for the socialist transformation of the LP are favourable. Corbyn, himself can be a problem in terms of his limited defensive support of the welfare state. However, the opportunity is there to make propaganda for socialism and to relate this to the Labour leadership contest. The conservative nature of the LP means that it could be opposed to any suggestion of the adoption of the aims of socialism. This is why a convincing argument for socialism has to be made. We also need to indicate how the election of Corbyn as leader of the LP can advance the cause of socialism. However, if all this is to occur an emphatic ideological transformation has to occur and the ideas of New Labour have to be opposed. The immediate temptation if Corbyn is elected leader is for party unity to be promoted. This possibility can only be opposed in a constructive manner if we strive to adopt a statement of intent that outlines the reasons for democratic socialism. Then the issues become between socialism or support for capitalism. The LP will have to decide whether it upholds the principles of socialism or effectively justifies the status quo in terms of adherence to global capitalism. Corbyn is unlikely to present differences in these terms, which is why the LP needs to become an active and democratic organisation that is capable of putting pressure on its leaders. Failure in this regard means the basis for a rotten compromise becomes likely. The possibilities for genuine change will be brief and connected to the ability of the LP membership to become a cohesive force. Marxism has a role to play in this regard, but this prospect is unlikely as long as the euphoria about the prospects of Corbyn becoming leader of the LP are not replaced with more critical thinking. Unfortunately very few presently understand the true historical significance of the present leadership contest within the LP. It is to be hoped that this article will clarify issues and indicate the historical importance of the argument for socialism within the LP.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Jack Conrad: Confusion and Disarray, In Weekly Worker, August 6th 2015, number 1070 p8

(2)ibid p9

(3)ibid p9

(4)ibid p9

(5)ibid p9

(6)Ralph Miliband: Socialism for a Sceptical Age, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994 p57