GENERAL LESSONS OF THE RECENT SPLIT WITHIN WORKERS POWER

There has recently been a split within Workers Power. This apparently concerned issues about inner party democracy and the construction of an anti-capitalist organisation. The majority of Workers Power were concerned with the defence of tradition, such as the role of the fighting propaganda group, but the minority emphasised the importance of intellectual freedom. What is immediately apparent is that the trend towards splits and fragmentation of recent years has not been ended because of the onset of crisis and the necessity of a united working class response to the austerity measures. On the contrary the development of crisis has only created a new dimension to the crisis of Marxism. The result of this process of splits is that Marxism is unable to promote a united organisational and political response in relation to the situation of crisis and is apparently unable to overcome differences in a constructive and amicable manner.(1)

The type of split within Workers Power has occurred in other Marxist organisations, and one of the impulses for this development is the question of the limitations of the party regime. Aspirations for the free exchange of views have been undermined by the demands of party orthodoxy and doctrine. The historical interpretation of democratic centralism has led to a situation in which the party leadership has been able to impose its positions in a manner that denies the dynamism and intellectual freedom represented by a situation of free discussion. Hence the only way that a minority opinion can express itself is to split with the dominant leadership. However the actual problem has not been resolved because the split has often taken the form of expression of different views about aspects of the economic and political situation. This means that the result of split has been the reassertion of new orthodoxies and the repression of inner party democracy.

The repetition of the central problem indicates that resolution requires a process of philosophical development and clarification. In other words the prevailing assumption is that it is possible to understand the world in an immaculate and flawless manner. Hence any opposition to the dominant view is considered to be heretical or opportunist because it is deemed to be incorrect. However the realm of Marxist theory indicates that there can be many contesting views about given aspects of social reality that are open to different interpretation and debate. For example, the importance of the tendency of the falling rate of profit is understood differently and the result is intellectual dispute and disagreement. It is not possible to end these types of dispute in a definitive manner and so the result is continuous and endless discussion. However what occurs in the sphere of Marxist theory does not influence the character of debate within the Marxist organisations. Instead it is assumed that there is one correct position and the organisation should support what is defined as orthodox and correct. However at some point someone will differ with this view and the result is ultimately the development of a split because the organisation has not allowed for the importance of the role of intellectual freedom and difference of opinion. This situation of restrictive orthodoxy can only be overcome if the party philosophical view that there is only one principled opinion about an event or process is rejected and replaced by the acceptance of intellectual diversity.

We can express this point in terms of the issue that led to the split between Workers Power and what became Permanent Revolution. The majority of Workers Power argued that their view of the economic crisis conformed to Marxist orthodoxy and was based on rejection of the dubious innovation represented by the views of PR. In contrast, PR considered that their view of the situation as an expression of financial crisis was correct and based on the highest levels of Marxist theory. In this situation there was no possibility of a common consensus or the modification of views on the basis of any merit in the arguments of the opponent. Ultimately in order to maintain the credibility and integrity of the given standpoint the logic of this dispute was a split. What should have been an amicable and constructive debate about the character of the economic situation resulted in factional differences and the promotion of oppositional tendencies that represented the prospect of a split. The inability to recognise any merit in the standpoint of the opponent meant that the approach of philosophical and political absolutism led to the development of an unnecessary and unprincipled split. Ironically the actual development of the crisis has confirmed aspects of both of the competing standpoints. However acknowledgment of this complexity would be to undermine the rigidity and certainty of two competing positions. The necessity to emphasise infallibility undermined any attempt to establish a principled compromise between two divergent views of the economic situation. In the real world of Marxist intellectual debate we have discussion based on different views of the crisis, but in the world of Marxist organisations we have discussion that results in splits.

These philosophical and political problems seemed to have repeated themselves in relation to the new split within Workers Power. Differences about what is meant by the concept of a fighting propaganda group have created the tendency for a split. It is obvious that the rejection of any merit in the standpoint of the opposing faction has promoted the prospect of a split. However there is also something new and historic in this situation. The minority grouping have emphasised the importance of intellectual diversity. They appear willing to accept the possibility that the free exchange of views will indicate what is limited, flawed and fallible in their own positions. Consequently in the very process of factional divide they appear to take the historic view that doctrine should be secondary to the significance of intellectual freedom. They appear willing to accept the view that they may be mistaken about their view of the world. Hence fallibility becomes the most important aspect of the lessons they have made from the recent split within Workers Power. The minority within Workers Power has dared to suggest they could be wrong. Obviously if this recognition is not to result in self-destruction, the minority will continue to argue in favour of what they considered to be right and principled. They will argue in terms of the defence and development of Marxism. But what is important is that they have established the prospect of a flexible and creative Marxism.

The DSA would humbly suggest that this process of development can be assisted in the following terms. We would argue that the core principles of democracy, revolution, communism and international class struggle can contribute to the development of a principled and yet creative Marxism.(2) We argue in favour of the importance of democracy because we are aware that without the role of democracy the struggle for communism will not advance and instead regress. Hence we think that Marx was astute when comprehending that the historical vindication of the Paris Commune was based on its advance of the forms of popular democracy. Thus we also believe that the inability to establish functioning Soviet democracy was an important aspect in the process of degeneration of the Russian revolution. Inner party democracy is also crucial if a revolutionary party is to be developed that can interact with a mass movement in the struggle for the transformation of capitalism. However the very character of democracy means that it cannot be reduced to particular formulas and forms, and instead only the free exchange of opinion can establish and renew what is genuinely democratic. Freedom of speech and of press is vital to the realisation of democracy in the struggle against capitalism and in the construction of communism.

We also support the conception of revolution not for dogmatic and historical reasons but because we consider that it is the most effective means to advance the transcendence of the exploitation and alienation of capitalism. However the question of what is meant by revolution as a strategy should be endlessly discussed and open to new interpretation. Hence we do not think it is necessarily opportunist to suggest that the act of revolution can be realised by peaceful means. But we also would argue that what is important to the development of the process of the revolution is that the working class should have an important and creative role. In this context we would reject the conception of party revolution, or the view that the working class should be subordinated to the party in the act of revolution. We would argue that this is a Stalinist approach and that the principled Marxist standpoint is that the role of the party is to assist and encourage the working class to carry out the act of revolution. The success of the revolution is connected to the issue of whether socialist relations of production are established. This is why we support workers control of production as the most principled expression of socialist relations of production.

Consequently if we apply the above to the understanding of the historical experience of the Russian revolution we would suggest that the character of the revolutionary regime was a bureaucratic workers state from mid-1918 because of the difficulties in developing international revolution and the lack of functioning Soviet democracy. The replacement of workers control by state nationalisation also contributed to the statist and technocratic character of the post-revolutionary process. Hence we reject the view that Thermidor occurred in 1921, and instead recognise that the New Economic Policy was important for the preservation of the Bolshevik regime. The degenerated workers state lasted until 1928 when it was replaced by the new class rule of Stalinism.(3) However we recognise that an orthodox view of the past is absurd and so we are willing to consider the importance of any alternative views about the character of Soviet Russia and the USSR.

We would also argue that the aim of communism is crucial to the realisation of the principles of Marxism. Communism establishes the criteria of morality, strategy and the character of the practice of class struggle. In other words we reject an expedient and pragmatic conception of political practice because this approach would undermine the capacity to realise communism. Instead communism is the end to which the means are subordinated, and therefore represents the criterion to assess political behaviour. Hence the aim of revolution is not power, but is instead an expression of advance towards the realisation of the communist society. Communism is a classless society and based on the highest levels of equality and the replacement of the role of the market by cooperative production. Historical experience has indicated that socialism in one country, or communism in one country, is not possible Instead the realisation of communism is an international process.

In order to realise communism we would argue that the development of international class struggle is necessary. This means that one of the important tasks of Marxism is to develop a strategy for the attainment of the success of international class struggle. For example in the present period we believe that it is possible and urgent to develop a strategy to advance the prospect of international class struggle against the austerity measures of the representatives of capital. The aim of international class struggle should be communism. We do not believe that the introduction of reforms would establish a secure basis for the advancement of the interests of the working class. Hence the aim of class struggle should be revolution and the development of communism.

Thus these four points represent what we consider to be the basis of a principled and creative Marxism. Hence we believe that the dilution of these principles would represent support for a reformist approach that would not advance the interests of working people and the aim of communism. But we consider that these aims should be discussed frankly and we would be flexible in relation to what could be considered the content of these core values and principles. Thus we suggest that adherence to these principles is the expression of principled Marxism, but that within these limits it is possible to have creative and dynamic discussion concerning what is meant by these four points. We could sum up our standpoint in terms of the slogan that there is an alternative to capitalism. This standpoint is compatible with the aims of a proposed anti-capitalist movement. The perspective of an alternative to capitalism could represent the basis to develop a mass movement of opposition to the present bourgeois policy of austerity and expenditure cuts.

It could be argued that the above argument represents the latest form of orthodoxy about reality and Marxist politics. The DSA would suggest that the above four core values do not represent the justification of a rigid ontology or particular conception of social reality. They do not express support for specific theories about economics or politics. We do recognise the importance of globalisation but would not necessarily expect others to support this view in the name of orthodoxy. Instead of infallibility and orthodoxy what we are concerned with is to establish demarcation between revolutionary Marxism and reformist varieties of socialism. At the most minimal level we are attempting to outline what is unprincipled reformist politics and how it differs from the communist standpoint of Marxism. In this context we believe that it entirely possible that the new group emerging out of Workers Power, Workers Power and PR could agree with what we have argued at the level of principles. We would suggest that the above could express the basis for the development and progress of an anti-capitalist movement.

What does the above analysis mean in terms of the standpoint of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky? Most of the organisations claiming to be revolutionary and Marxist would define themselves as Trotskyists. However Trotskyism can be divided into the politics and doctrine of a particular type of Marxism and the legacy of the struggle against Stalinism. The history of the politics of Trotskyism has often been controversial and the origin of many splits has its cause within the history of the Fourth International. We can all provide a perspective of what is principled or unprincipled in relation to developments within the Fourth International and the activity of Trotsky. Arguably these past struggles do not necessarily have relevance in relation to what can be defined as principled politics in the present. This is not to suggest that the politics of the past do not influence the approach of the present but what is important is the perspective we adopt towards the class struggle of the present. What is crucial is the approach we have towards the development of strategy and the elaboration of the aim of communism. In this context we should not artificially connect the standpoint of the past to the present and instead attempt to connect the perspectives of the various Marxist groups to the challenge posed by the prospect of struggle against austerity and for the alternative of communism. In other words the attitude towards the split in the Fourth International in 1951 is not crucial instead we want to know the approach of all groups in this situation of the crisis of capitalism. The point is not to reject the legacy of Trotsky but rather not to utilise the importance of Trotsky and the history of Trotskyism in a manner that undermines the prospect of unity in the present. Our emphasis should be upon the prospect of developing unity in the struggle against capitalism. It will be our adherence to the four core values of Marxism that will ensure that this process of unity will be principled and not opportunist.

In relation to the above argument we believe that the effective rejection of the legacy of Lenin and Trotsky in the name of a purified Marxism is also unhelpful. For example the view of PR which maintains that Lenin and Trotsky contributed to the development of Stalinism is unhelpful and can only intensify the theoretical and political problems of realising unity in the present. The point is not that Lenin and Trotsky are above criticism. The DSA also has criticisms of the role of Lenin and Trotsky in relation to the post-revolutionary process. But to argue that Lenin and Trotsky represented Thermidor is to suggest that their legacy is not principally different from that of Stalin. Hence the struggle for the principles of Leninism and Trotskyism against Stalinism is ultimately considered to be a futile project, or the expression of a struggle of one type of opportunism against another. This effective rejection of the legacy of the past is effectively to argue that the role of principled Marxism was ended in 1921. This dogmatic analysis of the past allows the arrogant view to be justified that only in the present has principled Marxism been revived via this elaboration of the conception that Thermidor started in 1921. This standpoint represents the rigid rejection of the past in the name of the present. This is the opposite error when compared to those that allow the past to unduly influence their view of the present. Instead in a critical manner we should argue that in general terms we defend the legacy of Lenin and Trotsky against the degeneration represented by Stalinism. However we should not conceive of the views of Lenin and Trotsky as a rigid doctrine that should not be altered and revised. Nor should the standpoint of Lenin and Trotsky be utilised in order to undermine the prospect of unity in the present. Instead we would consider that the theory of Lenin and Trotsky can contribute to the development of Marxist unity in the present.

The above analysis is meant to situate the views of the DSA. We primarily consider ourselves to be Marxist. The principles we stand for originate with the ideas of Marx and Engels. Hence we believe that what differentiates revolutionary ideas from those of reform is the issue of whether someone is a Marxist or the adherent of a different conception of socialism. In this context the importance of Lenin and Trotsky is in relation to their contribution to the principles and strategy of Marxism. Consequently we strive for the unity of Marxism and not the unity of its distinctive trends such as Leninism and Trotskyism. This does not mean that we are against the unity of Leninism and Trotskyism but we would envisage this type of unity in terms of the unity of Marxism, and so our central organisational aim would not be the unity of trends within Leninism and Trotskyism and instead we would be concerned with the unity of all those that adhered to the core principles of Marxism. The organisational and political aim would be to unite the diverse trends of Marxism, from Council Communists to semi-anarchists and Trotskyists within one single organisation. In theoretical terms the question of adherence to the principles of Marxism would mean Stalinism would be excluded, but this issue would have to be tackled sensitively and with flexibility. The ultimate basis for unity is the seriousness given to opposition to capitalism and support for the communist alternative.

Marx’s ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’ provides the arguments for communist unity in the present. In this document Marx was against all concessions to reformism and adaptation to the existing state, but clarification of these points would promote the prospect of principled unification. This would mean in the present that all illusions in the return of the welfare state would have to be rejected and support for the communist alternative affirmed. However the strict differentiation between capitalism and communism would not preclude the commitment to the highest levels of inner party democracy. This would mean the possibility of serious discussion about the revolutionary role of the working class - has it been replaced by the multitude- and the strategy of revolution, would be very important. All manner of discussion would be possible within the context of the flexible and general principles of the four core values of Marxism.

This point can be elaborated. It would be necessary to have non-dogmatic discussions about what we mean by democracy within the party and society. It would also be important to discuss what we mean by revolution and the character of communism. Possibly what would be most important would be discussions about the strategy that is required in order to oppose austerity measures and make progress in the class struggle. Consequently adherence to the core values of Marxism does not mean closure in intellectual terms and instead is the basis of the potential flourishing of debate about what we acknowledge to be important principles for the development of human emancipation. This means that Marxism is not considered to be a finished doctrine and instead can represent creativity as the basis of adherence to firm principles. It would be tragic if the group that has recently split with Workers Power concluded that Marxism was dogmatic and not a theory that was receptive to new ideas. The most constructive conclusion that they can articulate from their experience is that whilst the past experience of Marxist organisations has sometimes been a justification for dogma this development does not characterise Marxism as a theory. The choice is not between reformism and dogmatic and ossified Marxism, and is instead the principled choice between creative and rigid Marxism.

It is possible that the recent split within Workers Power represents a historical precedent. Most previous splits have expressed concern about political positions and alleged deviations from doctrine. In contrast the impetus to the recent split within Workers Power is about intellectual freedom and therefore is an issue that challenges the validity of Marxism in acute terms. The response of Marxists should be to welcome what has occurred and rise to the challenge and show that they can provide both principled and creative theory. This also means that groups should be receptive to the contribution of Marxist intellectuals that are not part of organisations. This contribution has been sadly neglected in the process of creating exclusive and dogmatic party ideology. We also hope that the group that has left Workers Power will hold meetings that can provide a forum for making progress towards the formation of a united Marxist organisation. The DSA sends its good wishes to this new group and hope that it is able to flourish in the post-factional situation.

FOOTNOTES

(1)This point about the crisis of Marxism has recently been elaborated in the DSA manifesto.

(2)Argued in a recent article about party unity

(3)A brilliant analysis of the theory and practice of the CPSU is Mark Sandle: ‘A Short History of Soviet Socialism’ (Routledge, Abingdon 1999)