UNDERSTANDING MARXIST UNITY BY PHIL SHARPE

Recently contributions in the pages of Weekly Worker have discussed the issue of Marxist unity. This has involved evaluation of the historical split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks and discussion of the political aspects of principled unity. The importance of the past seems to be obscure. Russian Marxism was divided between two definite trends that effectively had distinct strategies and conception of organisation. Mike Macnair argues that the First World War led to the definitive split and differentiation between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks.(1) His assessment seems to be the most perceptive and is able to explain the increasing process of demarcation between these rival tendencies. However what the debate does not establish is the relevance of these developments to the present task of developing unity within Marxism. Contemporary Marxism is divided into many different organisations and the prospect of unity seems to be unlikely. The working class needs a united Marxist organisation in order to provide effective strategic vision in the situation of austerity and crisis. Instead what are evident are the characteristics of fragmentation and the tendency for perpetual splits. The prospect of the formation of a united Marxist organisation seems to be highly unlikely in this situation of rigid ideological and political differentiation.

Macnair outlines three major criteria that could promote the possibility of principled political unity. The first condition is: ‘the ideas of working class political independence under capitalism and…the goal of working class rule.’(2) This standpoint is supportable but limited. We can agree that the prospect of effective class struggle within capitalism will be undermined if the working class remains under the dominant ideological influences that advocate the continuation of capitalism. Historically the struggles of the working class have been limited and restricted because of the domination and influence of the tendencies of reformism, Stalinism and bourgeois democracy. We would suggest that principled Marxism has to become the hegemonic influence within the working class if both social gains are to be defended most effectively and the prospect of the overthrow of capitalism is to be realised. Hence the political independence of the working class has to be advanced if the potential of the class struggle is to be realised with the successful overthrow of capitalism.

We would also agree that the aim of class struggle is to realise the political rule of the working class. However Macnair does not indicate what represents the means by which the domination of capital is to be effectively challenged, and nor does he outline the aim of the situation of working class hegemony. It is vital that the strategy of revolution is defended as the basis for the transformation of the relations of production and crucial for the political undermining of the domination of capital. Macnair would defend himself and argue that he is in favour of revolution, but to remove any ambiguity about this point he should explicitly establish his support for revolution and rejection of the reformist alternative. However this mistake of apparent incompleteness is less serious than his other omission. He has not outlined what is the aim of working class rule. Hence he seems to suggest that working class political power is an end in itself; the aim of class struggle is political power. If this was actually the aim of class struggle the intentions of those involved in the process of struggle would not be any different to the objectives of bourgeois political parties. They also strive for political power as their major aspiration. Thus it could be argued that the bourgeoisie and working class share the aim of power as an end in itself. However this assumption is actually a travesty of the potentialities represented by the class struggle and the realisation of the political rule of the working class.

The actual aim of the struggle to realise working class political hegemony is not power. The importance of power is entirely secondary to the primary objectives established by the formation of a workers’ state. Hence the major objective is the liberation of humanity and the establishment of a classless society by the realisation of communism. In order to realise this end it is necessary to develop socialist relations of production based on the importance of workers’ control and the realisation of the highest levels of political democracy. It was one of the mistakes of the Bolsheviks to conceive that political power was an end in itself. The result of this misconception was the degeneration of the Soviet regime and the rise of Stalinism. In other words the party-state regime was based on the primary importance of power and the result was corruption and tyranny. Historical experience has shown that human liberation cannot be advanced by the dictatorship of the party. Instead the working class must realise its own emancipation and to this end it must be guided by the ultimate aim of the realisation of communism. Thus power is a means to an end and should not become the end. This is the major lesson that we can extract from the Bolshevik experience. Consequently the strategy of principled Marxism should make reference to the importance of communism and the understanding that it can only be realised by the social and political progress made by the working class after the revolution. The situation in which the party dominates the working class is not acceptable and cannot advance the cause of communism.

Macnair’s second criterion of unity is: ‘the international unity of the working class, as opposed to various forms of left nationalism’.(3) This view is essentially acceptable, but is moralistic if there is an absence of recognition of the importance of how this unity is to be realised in the situation of the globalisation of capitalism and the challenges this creates. If the question of international working class unity is to be more than a moral truth we have to provide some sense of the criteria in which it can be realised in the present economic and social conditions. We would argue that the present situation of crisis and austerity promotes the prospect of united and international class struggle. The aim of Marxists would be to promote the possibility of an international general strike against the measures of the ruling class to undermine social conditions. The present situation of national activity is not sufficient to bring about change and instead the national divisions of the working class only assist the prospect of the introduction and consolidation of the austerity measures. This is why international class struggle is required in order to defeat the austerity measures within the European Union. In other words the very seriousness of the present situation is an indication of why internationalism should not remain at the abstract level of a good idea and instead should be promoted as the strategic basis of the advance of the interests of the working class and the basis of opposition to the ruling class. Internationalism should acquire a concrete form as the international general strike to reject the austerity measures and represent the prelude to the potential for the development of a social alternative to austerity and public expenditure cuts.

Macnair’s third premise concerns the importance of democracy. This should be expressed within the struggle to improve and transform the political structures of capitalism, and in relation to the character of the party and the trade unions. We can critically support this point but suggest that it should also relate to the character of the post-capitalist society. Historical experience has indicated that the effective absence of democracy has meant the undermining of the prospect to realise the development of a society without alienation and exploitation. The lack of democracy has led to the formation of a new ruling class and the subordination of the working class within the relations of production. Hence we would argue that the importance of democracy is integral to the struggle to transform capitalism and is a crucial aspect of the possibility to build a principled revolutionary party. Democracy is also indispensable if socialist relations of production are to be realised in the society established after the process of revolution. Macnair is right to argue that the question of democracy within parties is connected to the right to freely express opinions and the formation of factions that are able to communicate their views to the public.

Arising out of this critique of Macnair’s premises for the establishment of principled unity we would suggest that commitment to the principles of democracy, revolution, communism and international class struggle are very important. Democracy is important if Marxist parties are to be constructed that are based on accountability and the open expression of different viewpoints. The standpoint of democracy is also integral to our critique of capitalism and how we envisage the political character of the post-capitalist society. This means that one party dictatorship is not the expression of the role of democracy and instead will result in a regime that exploits working people rather than advances the prospect of human liberation. Hence the party state is the representation of the regression rather than the advance of the revolutionary process. In other words we would consider that the principled expression of democracy within the post-capitalist society would require political pluralism and the development of forms of democracy that are an advance from the limitations of representative democracy that are connected to the politics of capitalism. This means the aim of the Marxist party is to promote the flourishing of democracy within the revolutionary society rather than be the actual instrument of the political process. The domination of the state by the party has led to problems of tyranny and the exercise of the monopoly of power. We are confident that working people can establish viable popular organs of democracy that will enable society to flourish in political terms.

The second principle is that of revolution. We believe that historical experience has shown that reform cannot advance the prospect of the realisation of a society without exploitation. Reforms may result in social progress but they do not undermine the domination of capital and advance the prospect of human emancipation. However revolution is not identical to the role of violence and instead primarily expresses the act that can generate transformation from the domination of capitalist relations of production to the prospect of developing socialist relations of production. In this context we would suggest that the development of workers control of production is important if revolution is to occur, and progress in these terms would also propagate the importance of the formation of popular and democratic organs of alternative social power. Revolution is the political act that promotes the prospect of the realisation of communism. In contrast reform can modify capitalism but cannot advance the possibilities of communism. It is because we adhere to the standpoint of communism that we support the perspective of revolution. We are aware that the tactics that advance the prospect of revolution have to be flexible and changeable. This is why there is no exclusive and inflexible revolutionary process. But the aim of revolution is to establish working class political hegemony in order to facilitate the progress of socialist relations of production and the prospect of communism. The ends of revolution are inflexible but the means to the end can be flexible and so change in accordance with diverse circumstances.

The aim of revolution is communism. This is a society without exploitation, classes and the domination of the market. However the question of material abundance has become debatable within the context of a world with increasingly scarce resources. But communism can be realised despite the possibility that abundance may not be obtainable. The character of the transition period to communism is crucial if communism is to be realised. If new elites emerge, or the development of socialist relations of production is not advanced, the prospect of communism becomes problematical. Only the successful construction of socialism will enable communism to be realised. Socialism is the lower stage of communism. The development of socialism will mean the overcoming of the domination of capital and the alienation of labour, and important advances in the prospect of equality and fairness. Success in this context will make the prospect of communism feasible. If communism is not the aim of class struggle the result will be the problematical struggle to realise reforms. This will mean the gains and improvements of the working class will not be secure and instead there is the prospect that the offensive of capital will undermine the advances represented by the reforms. Historical experience of the last 30 years has confirmed this perspective. However if communism becomes the conscious aim of the mass movement then the progress represented by reforms can become part of the process of struggle and the aspiration for communism. Social progress becomes expressed by the aspiration for communism. Thus the only alternative to the situation of crisis and austerity measures is the potential for communism. The aim of communism represents what is meant by historical development. In contrast the continuation of capitalism represents social regression and the increasing erosion of the social gains made since 1945.

In order to realise communism it is necessary to develop a strategy of international class struggle. The onset of globalisation has created questions about the feasibility of all national conceptions of revolution and the class struggle. Furthermore the international character of the crisis indicates that only international class struggle can provide an alternative. This is why we would argue in favour of a European general strike as the alternative to the measures of the European Union, and as the strategic basis to advance the prospects of revolution and communism. It is also necessary to suggest that in this inter-connected world of economic activity, the self sufficient conception of socialism in one country is not feasible. Instead we advocate an international perspective of revolution in order to advance an international conception of the development of socialism and communism. In the past the international development of the class struggle has been undermined by the importance of imperialism and national divisions. But the advance of globalisation has generated the increasingly inter-connected character of economic and social activity. The international character of the Arab Spring indicates that the prospect of the international development of the struggle for communism is also possible. Hence we attempt to develop a strategy that would advance the possibilities of international class struggle.

The above principles are important and so we would not accept their dilution and rejection in the process of negotiation about the formation of a united Marxist party. We also consider that these principles are part of the ABC of Marxism and so would be surprised if any organisation tried to reject the above principles. However we are also flexible and would consider any additions to these principles, or even the expression of these principles in different and more varied terms. Hence we do not want to outline our principles as the justification of an ultimatum as to how Marxism should be united. Instead we are open to the reasonable suggestions of any other organisation as to how unity can be developed. This is why we are critical of the approach of Mike Macnair. He seems to outline his standpoint in terms of the continued justification of the Communist Party of Great Britain. The assumption is that people should join the CPGB and so the unity proposals of other organisations are effectively problematical. This is why he rejects the conception of the multi-tendency party and the prospect of united fronts between different left organisations. He also effectively rejects the possibility of the trade unions forming a worker’s party because of the problem of the bureaucracy of the unions.

This standpoint is rigid. The point is that there may be many diverse circumstances that create the possibility to form either a Marxist party or a worker’s party. We would be sectarian to reject these possibilities in the name of our principles, but we would also be opportunist if we rejected our principles in the name of the cause of unity. Hence we have to uphold our principles whilst not rejecting the possibilities of movement towards unity. This impulse could take many different forms, and it could mean that we are a Marxist minority within a mass workers party. We do not advocate the formation of a worker’s party on a programme that is opposed to Marxism. But we do not reject the prospects of joining this type of organisation in the name of our principles. Consequently we have to reconcile principles with flexibility and consider what will advance the political independence of the working class. We also have to recognise the importance of what type of organisation can advance the prospects of struggle against austerity and public expenditure cuts. In other words it is the tasks of class struggle and not purity that dictates out choices and options.

Thus we can argue that what is problematical about the approach of Mike Macnair is that it is based on dictates. He seems to present his principles in a manner that does not suggest the possibility of discussion and debate. Instead it is assumed that his approach is principled and so any objections would amount to the standpoint of opportunism. In contrast the DSA would contend that we advocate our principles in a flexible and open manner. We would suggest that the question of the importance of democracy, the character of revolution, and the aim of communism, together with the role of international class struggle, are open to discussion. Furthermore, we would be open to the prospect of the elaboration of additional principles in relation to the task of developing the prospect of party unity. Hence we would not conceive of our principles as immutable and an expression of closure. Instead we advocate them in the spirit of trying to advance the prospect of the unity of Marxism.

This point also refers to the question of the type of party that is being envisaged. The DSA is in favour of the development of a Marxist organisation on the basis of the core values of Marxism. However we can conceive a situation in which this is not possible and instead a worker’s party will emerge. Despite this not being our preference we would not necessarily reject involvement in this organisation. The worst possible situation is the one that exists in the present, which is represented by the tendency of Marxist organisations to split and fragment. This represents a crisis of Marxism which has been described by the DSA.(4) In order to overcome this crisis we have to concern ourselves with the possibilities of promoting the unity of Marxism and developing a strategy that is relevant for the class struggle.(5) The alternative of disunity cannot advance the interests of the working class to advance and effectively challenge capitalism. Mike Macnair seems indifferent to the challenges posed by the present and the problems of developing a viable Marxist organisation.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) Mike Macnair: ‘Both Pham Binh and Paul Le Blanc Are Wrong’ Weekly Worker 908 April 5th 2012 p8-9

(2) ibid p8

(3) ibid p8

(4)The recent DSA Manifesto analyses the crisis of Marxism (2012)

(5)The draft DSA programme for the crisis