Introduction

Sun, 05/03/2000 - 18:00

Since the dawn of civilisation, the history of humanity has been shaped by a constant struggle between classes. The haves and the have-nots battle for control of society?s wealth. This conflict is sometimes slow and dogged; at other times it bursts out in open rebellion, in civil wars and revolutions.

This is a history that the rich and powerful try to conceal. They present us with a catalogue of the actions of ?Great Men?; history becomes little more than the story of their lives.

We are taught about the Pharoahs of Ancient Egypt, the temples, tombs and pyramids built during their rule. Nothing is told of the people who built them; we are left ignorant of their great strikes to be paid their gold or grain which was often held back to allow the priests and the king to hoard them in their granaries and temples.

We are told of the famous conquests of Julius Caesar and the Roman Emperors, but little of the great slave rebellion led by Spartacus, whose armies once held vast areas of Italy under their control.

The history of the modern world is also wracked with class struggle. The system we live under today - capitalism - did not develop gradually and peacefully but as a result of mighty wars and revolutions. The ancestors of our present rulers first had to challenge and overthrow the rule of the old landowning aristocracy.

In the English Civil War of the 17th century and the French Revolution of 1789-93, it was representatives of the rising capitalist class - the bourgeoisie - who cut off the heads of all-powerful kings like Charles I and Louis XVI, and who introduced new laws to allow capitalism to flourish.

But history did not end with the victory of the capitalists. Modern industry also brought another class into being: the working class, the proletariat.

This vast and growing class, herded together in factories, had no way of making a living except to sell their labour in return for wages. Brutalised, forced to work long hours in appalling conditions for a pittance, denied basic human and democratic rights, these modern wage-slaves began a struggle against the capitalists which has lasted to this day and will continue for as long as capitalism exists.

The British proletariat founded the first democratic political movement of this new class: the Chartists. In 1842 they launched a general strike and their members mounted an armed uprising in Newport, raising the red flag for the first recorded time.

In the second half of the nineteenth century British workers went on to build mass trade unions so as to defend their pay and conditions of work, mostly in the face of stiff resistance from their employers.

The German workers went a step further. In 1875 they set up the first mass political party committed to the overthrow of capitalism. Their goal was a new system based on the abolition of wage slavery and profit
and the replacement of competition by co-operation - in a word, socialism.

This party, the Social Democracy, under the influence of the Communist theory of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, organised workers in every walk of life, fought off a government ban on socialism, and rose to become both the largest political party in Germany and the cornerstone of a strong International association of working class socialist parties - the Second International.

In France, the workers’ movement was imbued with the bourgeois revolutionary traditions of 1789. But a little more than 80 years later Paris was to be the crucible of a revolution directed against the bourgeoisie itself. In 1871 the workers of Paris rose up in armed insurrection and established the first ever proletarian government, the Paris Commune.

It was drowned in blood after a siege by the forces of capitalist law and order. But it lasted long enough to prove - even in defeat - that the proletariat was a revolutionary class, willing to make heroic sacrifices and, most importantly, capable of running society itself without the help of bosses, professional politicians or press barons.

The idea of class struggle is essential if we are to understand the ebbs and flows of history, its dangers and its promise. In place of a dry list of kings and queens, prophets and popes, we can examine the effect of masses of people on history.

In particular we can focus on the sharp conflict of basic interests between the classes - how they struggle for access to money, food, shelter, leisure time and political power.

This class struggle is the motor force that drives history onwards. It compelled slaves to fight emperors, bourgeois to fight aristocrat, worker to fight bourgeois. It casts the great tale of oppression and resistance, of barbarism and humanity, in a new light.

The ?Great Men? of history may appear to make their momentous decisions quite freely; in reality their freedom of action is limited by the class struggle of their day. As Karl Marx wrote:

?Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted.?

None of this is to deny the important role individuals play in changing history. A class has neither hands to work nor a brain to think; it is composed of millions of individuals. In a government or a political movement, the foremost representatives of a class combine to decide where their true interests lie and to act accordingly.

In its revolutionary past, the bourgeoisie had its share of genuinely great leaders, people like Cromwell and Robespierre who let nothing stand in the way of progress and led the revolutionary destruction of the monarchy and the feudal system. They owe their place in history to their ruthless and uncompromising struggle for the interests of their rising class.

The working class movement also has its share of such extraordinary individuals. Among the greatest of them is Leon Trotsky, who stood at the head of the most successful working class struggle that history has yet seen.

In October 1917, as Chairman of the Council of Workers? and Soldiers? Deputies (the ?Soviet?) in Petrograd, the capital of the Russian Empire, he organised and led an armed uprising that overthrew the capitalist government, dissolved their secret police and state apparatus, and installed in its place a state
based on delegates elected by the mass of the working class themselves. This event was to change the
course of history.

Unlike the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution was to survive more than a matter of months.

But it faced an immediate threat. Armies from 14 capitalist states, including France, Britain and Japan,
invaded revolutionary Russia and fought alongside the ?White Armies? organised by Russian generals
loyal to the old ruling class.

Trotsky took the lead in building up, from the exhausted and war-weary peasants and workers of Russia, a
new Red Army, an army unlike any other before or since, which resisted and defeated the Whites.

So different from narrow nationalist politicians of the bourgeois type, Trotsky looked beyond the boundaries
of Russia to the working class movements of Germany, Britain, France, China and the East.

He called on them to come to the aid of the Soviet republic by settling accounts with the capitalists in their
own countries. This internationalism was an integral part of Trotsky?s political outlook.

When the workers of the western countries failed to follow the Russian example with successful revolutions
of their own, the revolution in Russia was thrown into isolation and retreat.

A growing caste of bureaucrats and middlemen began to elevate their own interests above the
international revolution and the working class.

From as early as 1923 Trotsky denounced this slide into bureaucratic dictatorship and nationalism in
Russia. He denounced the aspiring dictator Stalin, to his face, as the ?gravedigger of the revolution?.

In a mounting campaign of repression, hundreds of thousands of the most self-sacrificing communists
were imprisoned, tortured and murdered by Stalin and his henchmen.

Trotsky was the only leading Russian revolutionary to not give up the fight against this bloody regime that
lied and murdered its way to political power in the world?s first workers? state.

Trotsky was cast into exile, first confined to the wilderness of the Soviet east. Expelled to Turkey he was to
be hounded to Norway, through France and finally to Mexico.

Regardless of his temporary resting place, Trotsky mounted a fearless campaign against Stalinism, its
abandonment of the aims and ideals of the 1917 revolution and its misleadership of Communist Parties all
over the world.

He rallied those communists who opposed Stalinism and were still committed to the revolutionary cause
into a new world party of socialist revolution - the Fourth International. He was still fighting when a Stalinist
assassin smashed his skull with an ice pick at his Mexico home on 19 August 1940.

To study Leon Trotsky?s life does not mean falling into a ?Great Men? theory of history. Still less does it
mean setting up a new cult of Trotsky?s personality along the lines of the Stalin cult that he so despised.

The Trotskyist movement today bears his name not because we are trapped in the past, but because we
are fighting for the future. Leon Trotsky was a revolutionary.

We study his life, his actions and his writings, because we too are committed to revolution.