



The Labour Party Tactic

Mon, 30/05/1983 - 10:59

A democratic centralist cadre party is an absolute necessity if the struggles of the working class are to be led towards a centralised offensive against the bourgeois state power. Such a party must attain mass proportions in order to embrace the actual front line fighters of the workers' struggles.

No sect which by self-proclamation claims to be the vanguard, no "historical process" or unconscious centrist current can do duty for this. The party must be built in and through the struggles of the working class. In the first phase of the imperialist epoch revolutionary Marxists in certain countries took the lead in this task and created mass cadre parties. However even in this period in certain countries-mainly "Anglo-Saxon" (UK, USA, Australia etc) ? this process met the powerful obstacle of a mass trade union movement whose leaders were wedded to a bourgeois party.

In Britain the union leaders formed a sub-section of the Liberal Party, the Lib-Labs. Since the 1930s the AFL-CIO leaders have formed a similar component of the American Democratic Party. In the more developed semi-colonial countries-Argentina, for example-the union bureaucracy remains wedded to bourgeois nationalism. To deal with this situation revolutionary Marxists elaborated a variant of the united front tactic applicable to the task of breaking the unions or other mass proletarian organisations from their political servitude to the bourgeoisie and posing the need for a revolutionary party.

This tactic, which we will call "the Labor Party tactic" , is not aimed at the creation of reformist Labour Parties on the British model. Indeed whilst it starts from the position of "breaking with the bourgeoisie", it is aimed at obstructing the formation of a disguised bourgeois party. Formally independent reformist parties are independent only on the terrain of electoral conflict and not on the battlefield of the classes.

The goal of the Labor Party tactic is to facilitate the creation of a vanguard revolutionary workers' party which has won the leadership of the trade unions. In any actual situation where a separate workers' party is being formed on the basis of the unions, the outcome-reformist or revolutionary-will be determined by struggle. The Labor Party tactic did not spring fully formed from the heads of Engels, Lenin or Trotsky.

All three however contributed to the development of the tactic, Trotsky in the late 1930s giving it a definite expression. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Marxists held that the creation of a workers' party was, in itself, historically progressive. This was held to be true even in those cases, like Britain and Australia, where the party in question did not embrace the Marxist programme. Engels' attitude to the British labour movement was a case in point.

Inter-imperialist competition at the end of the nineteenth century began to weaken the supremacy of British imperialism. The limitations of the British labour movement's reliance on trade unionism and a political alliance with the openly bourgeois Liberal Party became exposed.

The defence and improvement of living standards required a political instrument independent of the openly bourgeois bosses' parties. The need for an independent party of the working class was acutely posed. The reformist Labour Representation Committee (1900) and the Labour Party (1906) resulted from the trade unions' break with the Liberals and turn to independent political representation. This reformist outcome, however, was by no means pre-ordained.

A correct intervention by revolutionaries could have either prevented the party being established as a bourgeois workers' party or at least established a mass revolutionary alternative leadership inside or outside the framework of this party. The possibility of this reformist outcome should not have deterred Marxists from participating in the formation of this party, despite their initial numerical weaknesses. That the Marxists would start off as a tiny minority was not

decisive.

As Lenin noted writing in 1907: "Engels insisted on the importance of an independent workers' party, even with a bad programme, because he was dealing with countries where up till now there has not been even a hint of the political independence of the workers-where the workers mostly follow and still follow, the politics of the bourgeoisie."

Engels argued that the masses must go through the experience of forming a party and he believed that they could and would learn from it. Writing to Sorge in 1889 about the new working class upsurge he said: "Now the movement has at last been set going and, I believe, for good. But it is not directly socialist, and those among the English who have understood our theory best remain outside it . . . Moreover, the people regard their immediate demands as only provisional, although they themselves do not yet know toward what final goal they are working. But this vague notion has a strong enough hold on them to make them elect as leaders only downright socialists.

Like everyone else, they must learn by their own experiences, from the consequences of their own mistakes. But since, unlike the old trade unions, they greet every suggestion of the identity of interest between capital and labour with scornful laughter, this will not take very long."

The element of perspective contained here, oft repeated by Engels and based on the visible weakening of Britain's economic position, was to prove incorrect. Engels could not foresee the massive growth of imperialist exploitation which would strengthen reformism within the working class. To understand and combat this would be the task of the next generation of revolutionary Marxists.

However Engels recognised that unity between Marxists and non-Marxists in the formation of a working class party was no barrier to the struggle for independent class politics within that party. This was an important starting point for the development of the Labor Party tactic in the United States of America by the Comintern and later Trotsky. The Communist movement in the USA emerged from the terrible crisis of the American socialist and syndicalist movement in the war years and immediately post war years.

It emerged as a chronically divided and persecuted movement isolated from the great bulk of American workers and with little appreciation of the tactics necessary to escape from this. The Comintern waged a prolonged struggle to unite the movement and vanquish the sectarian elements within it. The turning point came at the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921. At this Congress the Comintern set out the need for Communist Parties to win the masses through practising unity in action against the bosses.

While nothing definitive was resolved in relation to the united front in America at this Congress Lenin, for the first time, raised the question of a Labor Party with the US delegates. In 1922 at the Fourth Congress, the American Communists, newly emerged from the underground as the Workers' Party, had already begun to develop a position in favour of a Labor Party.

In May 1922, the Workers' Party passed a set of Theses on the united front which recognised the Labor Party as the specific form of the united front in the US. In October of the same year the CI representative in the States, Pepper, published a pamphlet "For a Labor Party ". This portrayed the Labor Party as a party of the whole of the organised labour movement, but which would have as its goal: "the abolition of wage slavery, the establishment of a workers' republic and a collectivised system of production."

However, when it came to the practical application of this specific form of united front the American communists revealed their limited understanding of the principled operation of such a tactic.

In 1923 the Workers' Party convened a conference for a Labor Party with the reformist-led Chicago Federation of Labor and the populist Farmer-Labor movement (a loose coalition of parties from various states.) At the conference the communists placed their entire emphasis on the need for the rapid formation of a party.

The issue under debate was when that party should be formed rather than what its political content was to be This

organisational fetishism of the communists precipitated a premature split with the reformist union leaders. The CP decamped to form the Federated Farmer-Labor Party (FFLP).

Through successful conference packing the CP gained control of this party but it proved a Pyrrhic victory. The FFLP was only an enlarged shadow of the communists. It was not a mass party of the American working class-indeed it purported to straddle two classes, farmers and Labor-and it did not have a revolutionary programme

Within the Workers' Party the principal opponents of this FFLP orientation were James Cannon and the former syndicalist William Z. Foster. Their opposition was not to the political content of the FFLP but to the fact that the split with Fitzpatrick of the Chicago Federation of Labor had isolated communist militants from the "progressives" in the unions, the AFL. Their opposition to Pepper, the proponent of the split, was a right-wing one. Cannon himself admitted that at the time he was a "pronounced right-winger".

Pepper, on the other hand, insisted that the FFLP was a mass party and a victory for the communists. The lack of disagreement over the programmatic content of the tactic was borne out by the fact that all sides supported Pepper's later scheme of using the FFLP to support a middle class candidate in the 1924 Presidential elections.

Both Pepper and Cannon, for different reasons, saw support for the Liberal Wisconsin senator LaFollette as a means of vindicating their respective orientations. Cannon saw it as a means of rebuilding the party's bridges to the progressives in the unions who looked to LaFollette.

Pepper, on the other hand, was developing a theory that the American farmers were the truly revolutionary force in the country. By supporting LaFollette the FFLP could fuse with these farmers to bring about an alliance with the petit-bourgeoisie within a two-class party. This party would in turn bring about a Third American Revolution (bourgeois democratic) which would clear the way for a fourth, proletarian one. This was an early version of Stalin's Menshevik "stages" strategy.

It was only the Comintern's intervention that prevented this course of action from actually being carried out in America. The Comintern's opposition forced the Communists to break completely with all sections of the Farmer-Labor movement, wind up the FFLP and "turn left". The Zinoviev-led Comintern prompted the CP to "rectify" its errors by committing another, i.e. denouncing LaFollette as a fascist!

The whole experiment revealed a fundamental weakness in the Labor Party tactic as conceived by the American Communists. From a sectarian abstention from the real Labor Party movement in 1919 the Communists eventually arrived at a position which regarded the formation of a Labor Party, regardless of what sort of programme it had, as the object of the tactic. This necessarily led them to accept the role of friendly midwives to a reformist Labor Party.

The "left" alternative to this was to act as abortionist to the moves for political independence within the unions. Cannon certainly thought of a Labor Party as a reformist one and even envisaged a Third Party Alliance across the classes. This mistake was based on a misreading of Engels' advice in the 1880s, one that failed to recognise the importance of the split in the Second International and the development of the Third. It was a position based on the no-longer valid premise that any type of workers' party would be an unqualified progressive step. This confusion persisted even among the best revolutionary communists until the late 1930s.

Within the Comintern and the American Party, the ascendancy of Stalinism prevented a critical appraisal of the 1922-23 period from being made. When the American Left Opposition was formed, it simply took over the position formerly held by the Communist Party. Cannon's programme for the Left Opposition in America stated: "The perspective of a Labor Party as a primary step in the political development of the American workers, adopted by the party in 1922 after a sharp struggle in the party and at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, holds good today, although the forms and methods of its realisation will be somewhat different than that indicated at that time".

The programme did criticise the fake "Labor Party" initiatives such as the FFLP, and attacked Pepper's notion of a two-class "Farmer-Labor" party, calling instead for a Labor Party and an alliance with poor farmers. However, the key error

of 1922-23-seeing the formation of the party in itself as a necessary step-was repeated. Its intrinsic right wing logic was not realised. It was this position that led Trotsky in 1932 to criticise the American Trotskyists' position.

Trotsky's criticism was based on an opposition to the idea that revolutionaries themselves should call for a Labor Party. In the terms in which Cannon posed the slogan ? for a reformist Labor Party ? Trotsky's criticism was completely valid. First, the years of relative prosperity up to 1929 had undermined any mass movement for a Labor Party.

Secondly, a victory for the Left Opposition in the Comintern would enable a regenerated revolutionary communist party to place itself at the head of the working class when the latter's militancy revived. Thirdly, the practice of creating long term blocs with the reformists or petit-bourgeois or bourgeois nationalists had been the essence of the Stalin-Bukharin betrayals in China and Britain. It had been developed into a full-blown stages theory. For Trotsky, the creation of a reformist party was not a desirable "first step", but a potential stumbling block to the revolutionary development of America's workers. For all of these reasons, he concluded: "the creation of a Labor party could be provoked only by mighty revolutionary pressure from the working masses and by the growing threat of communism. It is absolutely clear that under these conditions the Labor party would signify not a progressive evolution of the working class".

While Trotsky's criticism of the rightist position of the Americans was correct as a criticism, it was itself flawed by a shared belief that the Labor Party could only be conceived of as a reformist party. Trotsky's view boiled down to the proposition that the Labor Party was either unnecessary or reactionary.

It would prove unnecessary if there was a mass upsurge of revolutionary consciousness in which case a mass communist party would be formed. It would be reactionary if the trade union leaders were able to dominate the movement. This view was much less dialectical than his later position, since it excluded a situation which combined these phenomena-where the mass pressure for a Labor Party could be turned against the reformist leaders.

His later perspective, embodied in the Transitional Programme, was based on an understanding of the depth of the imperialist crisis and the lag in the consciousness of the working class. From this flowed a deep crisis of leadership within the proletariat's organisations. It was vital for revolutionaries to be able to intervene in forward movements of the working class, whilst they were still under reformist leadership. It was necessary in order to win them to effective tactics and a coherent anti-capitalist strategy. In the heat of battle an alternative leadership could be forged and the crisis of leadership surmounted. The rise of the mass industrial unions-the CIO movement-in the mid 1930s, laid the basis for Trotsky's re-elaboration of the Labor Party tactic. He did this in the light of the now fully-developed method of the Transitional Programme.

At its founding conference in 1938, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of America repeated Trotsky's 1932 position on the Labor Party, almost word for word. But now Trotsky rebuked them for it and fought to turn the party's position round on its axis! Trotsky took two developments into consideration in developing his position in 1938. First, he analysed the CIO upsurge as a factor that would renew the working class's perception of the need to take political action.

For this they would require a political party. He posed the choice for the working class thus: ?It is an objective fact in the sense that the new trade unions created by the workers came to an impasse ? a blind alley ? and the only way for workers organised in trade unions is to join their forces in order to influence legislation, to influence the class struggle. The working class stands before an alternative. Either the trade unions will be dissolved, or they will join for political action.?

In other words, the objective situation posed sharply the need for a workers' party. Moreover, if millions of workers in the CIO turned to political action, then their reformist leaders would be likely to channel them in an exclusively reformist direction. Revolutionaries could not afford to abstain from any stage of the workers' political development if they were to have a chance of shaping it in a revolutionary direction. To this end they could unite with the millions of reformist-led workers to say to their leaders:?"Break with the bourgeois parties, do not tie our unions politically to the

bosses". In so doing they could place themselves in a favourable position to advance the revolutionary programme as the content of the political break with the bourgeois Democratic Party.

Trotsky's second consideration was that the American section had not been able to assume leadership of the working class as rapidly as he had earlier hoped. This intensified the crisis of leadership within the working class. The masses were demanding political answers. This was reflected in the resurrection of a genuine Labor Party movement in organisations like Labor's Non-Partisan League, the American Labor Party in New York, and others.

If the SWP abstained from these movements then the "crisis of leadership" would be resolved by the bureaucrats responding to the masses' pressure precisely by creating a reformist Labor Party. To prevent this, and to channel the movement in a revolutionary direction, Trotsky developed the Labor Party tactic by transcending his own previous objections. He introduced into the tactic an algebraic element. That is, he combined the united front to build an independent party, with the advancement of a transitional programme that would, if adopted, signify the triumph of revolutionaries within the party.

He overcame the apparently stageist "reformist Labor Party" tactic, replacing it with one in which struggle would determine the outcome of the call for a Labor Party: "Are we in favour of the creation of a reformist Labor Party? No. Are we in favour of a policy which can give to the trade unions the possibility to put its weight upon the balance of forces? Yes. It can become a reformist party ? it depends upon the development. Here the question of programme comes in.?"

By fighting for its own programme as the programme of the Labor Party, the SWP opened up the possibility of shaping it as a revolutionary party. Naturally, this would be decided over a fairly short period of time, in a bitter struggle with the bureaucracy. But it remained a possibility and therefore was the goal that the SWP should set itself.

If the revolutionaries won out, they could organise the Labor Party as a revolutionary combat party, purged of reformists, Trotsky argued. But programme came first. A struggle for programme would decide whether the party would become revolutionary or reformist. It was for this reason that Trotsky thought that if practically realised, then the Labor Party "can preserve progressive significance only during a comparatively short transitional period."

That is, until the battle between the reformists and revolutionaries was decided one way or the other. If the latter won, it would "inevitably break the shell of the Labor Party and permit the SWP to rally around the banner of the Fourth International the revolutionary vanguard of the American proletariat". If the reformists won, then a counter-revolutionary social democratic party would be the result.

By 1938 Trotsky had developed the Labor Party tactic into its most refined revolutionary form. The guidelines that he laid down remain valid today. They can be summarised thus:

- a) A refusal to accept that the demand for an independent party based on the trade unions, and the attendant demand on the bureaucracy to break with the bourgeoisie, are synonymous with the call for a reformist Labor Party.
- b) The raising of the Transitional Programme as the programme for the Labor Party is the means of fighting to secure a revolutionary development.
- c) The maintenance of a revolutionary organisation even within a Labor Party movement is essential for the inevitable battle with the bureaucracy.
- d) Periods of economic crisis and sharpening class struggle are the most favourable for raising the Labor Party slogan. However, even during "calm periods" the slogan retains a propagandistic value and can be acted upon agitationally in local situations or elections. For example, against support for a bourgeois party candidate in an election, revolutionaries would call on the unions to field an independent working class candidate.
- e) In no sense is a Labor Party that is anything less than the revolutionary party a necessary stage in the development of the working class in countries where there are no workers' parties.
- f) Once again it must be remembered ? programme first. Today in the USA and elsewhere these guidelines ? much trampled upon by groups like today's thoroughly right centrist SWP(US) ? must inform a revolutionary application of

the Labor Party tactic.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/labour-party-tactic>