



Militant's peaceful parliamentary road

Stephen Foster and Mark Hoskisson Thu, 30/03/1989 - 10:59

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'We have proclaimed hundreds, if not thousands of times that we believe that, armed with a clear programme and perspective, the labour movement in Britain could effect a peaceful socialist transformation.' Peter Taaffe, editor of *the Militant*

'The supersession of the bourgeois state by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution.' V I Lenin

The Militant newspaper in Britain organises its supporters into what it calls the 'Marxist wing' of the Labour Party. Moreover, it describes itself and its supporters as Trotskyist. The Militant's supporters have co-thinkers in a number of countries, all espousing broadly similar politics. The defining feature of Militant's politics is the elevation of Trotsky's tactic of entristm into mass reformist workers' parties into an immutable strategy.

Entry is carried out in the belief that the contradictions of class struggle will inevitably propel the reformist and Stalinist mass parties to overthrow capitalism. Whether the resulting workers' states will be 'deformed' or healthy depends upon the outcome of the struggle between the conscious Marxist wing and the reformist and Stalinist leaders. Evolved by Michel Pablo in the early 1950s, this strategy has long been applied towards the British Labour Party by Militant and its predecessors.

For Militant the task of the Marxist wing prior to the moment when the mass parties are transformed is clear. Always, and whatever the cost in terms of compromising political principles, the 'Marxist wing' must stay inside the mass reformist parties. As a result the 'Marxism' of Militant takes on the camouflage of whatever national reformist or Stalinist party becomes the target of the entry strategy.

Leaving aside Militant's schema for transforming the Labour Party, we want to challenge here its claim to represent any form of Marxism within the labour movement. Its politics are thoroughly right-centrist, its Trotskyism degenerate in the extreme, its direction inexorably towards reformism.

Its centrism, like Kautsky's in the period after the First World War, excuses and conceals reformist politics by using the language of orthodox Marxism as a cloak. It does this most clearly on the most fundamental question facing Marxists: the capitalist state.

For genuine Marxists the transition to socialism can only begin once the proletariat has seized political power from the bourgeoisie and smashed the capitalist state. The transition can only be taken forward if capitalist counter-revolution is destroyed, workers' democracy developed and extended and the revolution itself internationalised. These are bedrock principles of Marxism. Yet Militant tramples on every one of them.

In place of the strategy of the proletarian seizure of power Militant puts forward the schema of a Labour government with a parliamentary majority and a socialist programme, implementing the transformation of society by legislative means. Peter Taaffe argues:

'... in the pages of Militant, in pamphlets, and in speeches, we have shown that the struggle to establish a socialist Britain can be carried through in Parliament backed up by the colossal power of the labour movement outside. This, however, will only be possible on one condition: that the trade unions and Labour Party are won to a clear Marxist

programme, and the full power of the movement is used to effect the rapid and complete socialist transformation of society.? 1

At the level of strategy this amounts to a parliamentary road to socialism via an established reformist party?that is a bourgeois workers? party. Nowhere in the pages of Militant or its associated journals do we find any references to the need (in Britain) for workers? councils as the organs of struggle and of proletarian power in order to effect the revolution. Nowhere do we find the argument for a workers? militia as an alternative to the capitalists? military machine. Nowhere do we find the call for a revolutionary party, distinct from all shades of reformism and centrism, as the necessary leadership for the proletariat in the revolution. Parliament and the existing organisations of the working class are deemed sufficient. Indeed, the job of workers? organisations is merely to supplement and enhance the work of the left parliamentarians. Even these existing reformist led organisations are not cited as an alternative form of political power to Parliament. As Taaffe explains:

?The struggle to enhance the position of Labour in Parliament has always been supplemented by the struggle outside Parliament, both of the trade unions and the Labour Party.? 2

This parliamentary strategy leads to a crucial error; the down-playing of the role of the working class, of its self-organisation as the key to its self-emancipation in the course of revolution. If anyone, particularly the reformist leadership of the Labour Party, were in any doubt about the Militant?s commitment to Parliament, Rob Sewell repeated the essence of their position in an indignant reply to the reformist Geoff Hodgson:

?The idea put forward by Hodgson that we want to ?smash parliamentary democracy? is completely untrue. Unlike the sectarian grouplets on the fringe of the labour movement we have stressed that a socialist Britain can be accomplished through Parliament, backed up by the mobilised power of the labour movement outside.? 3

The swipe against the left in order to appease the right is a classic characteristic of centrism.

The real Marxist road to socialism

Revolutionary Marxists utilise an altogether different strategy for the seizure of power to the one outlined by Sewell and Taaffe. We reject the parliamentary road to socialism and we hold that the self-organisation of the masses into organs of struggle is pivotal to the victory of the revolution. Parliament is part and parcel of the British bourgeois state machine. Its bourgeois democratic aspects mean that we do not reject the use of parliamentary tactics, including the standing of revolutionary candidates in elections or critical support for the mass reformist workers? party. But we subordinate such tactics to the requirements of the revolutionary class struggle, to the overall strategy of proletarian revolution.

We use parliamentary tactics not in order to strengthen workers? illusions in Parliament as a potential agent of fundamental change, but to destroy those illusions. We use Parliament as a platform from which we can denounce every aspect of capitalism, not as the vehicle for a peaceful transition to socialism. There is nothing sectarian about this despite Sewell?s claim. It is entirely in accord with everything that Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky ever wrote about parliamentarism. Arguing against the opportunist leaders of the Second International, who also claimed that any criticism of parliamentarism was sectarian, Lenin stated:

?Marx knew how to break with anarchism ruthlessly for its inability to make use even of the ?pigsty? of bourgeois parliamentarism, especially when the situation was obviously not revolutionary; but at the same time he knew how to subject parliamentarism to genuinely proletarian criticism.

To decide once every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and crush people through Parliament?that is the real essence of bourgeois parliamentarism, not only in parliamentary-constitutional monarchies, but also in the most democratic republics.? 4

What is at stake, therefore, in our argument with Militant is not whether Parliament can be used by revolutionaries?it

can?but what it has to be used for. Under Lenin and Trotsky the Communist International (Comintern) developed Lenin?s theme of rejecting Parliament as a road to socialism, while using it as a means of advancing the position of the proletariat. The Comintern started from the need for an insurrection against the bourgeois state and then allocated a place for parliamentary activity as a subordinate tactic in the march towards insurrection:

?The mass struggle is a whole network of activities which increasingly intensify and logically culminate in an insurrection against the capitalist state. As the mass struggle develops into civil war the leading party of the proletariat must, as a general rule, secure each and every legal position using them as auxiliary centres of its revolutionary work and subordinating them to its plan for the overall campaign of mass struggle.

The platform of bourgeois Parliament is one such auxiliary centre . . . The Communist Party enters this institution not to function within it as an integral part of the parliamentary system, but to take action inside Parliament that helps smash the bourgeois state machine and Parliament itself . . .? 5

In sharp contrast to Militant?s protestations to Hodgson that they are loyal to parliamentary democracy and in no way wish to destroy it, the Comintern declared:

?[Communism] sets itself the task of destroying parliamentarism. It follows from this that bourgeois state institutions can be used only with the object of destroying them. This is the one and only way the question of their utilisation can be posed.? 6

The Comintern asserted, categorically, that the rejection of the parliamentary road flowed from the centrality of mass proletarian action and organisation within the revolution. Where Militant argues for a schema in which mass action ?supplements? or ?enhances? parliamentarism, the Comintern argued for the opposite:

?Since the focal point of the struggle for state power lies outside Parliament the questions of proletarian dictatorship and the mass struggle for its realisation are, obviously, immeasurably more important than the question of how to use the parliamentary system.? 7

And:

?The most important form of proletarian struggle against the bourgeoisie and its state power is, first and foremost, mass action, which is organised and directed by the revolutionary mass organisations of the proletariat (unions, parties, soviets) under the general leadership of a united, disciplined, centralised Communist Party.? 8

Militant?s parliamentarism is at odds with Marxism. It is a strategy that substitutes bourgeois forms of democracy and a bourgeois party (the Labour Party) in office, for the independent organisation of the masses and for the leadership of a revolutionary party.

Parliamentary cretinism

How on earth, then, does Militant defend its position and still claim to be Marxist? How does it distinguish itself from the left-reformists who advocate a similar parliamentary road?

It does so in two ways. First, it argues that a Marxist majority will utilise Parliament in a new way by passing an ?Enabling Bill? so that socialism can be legislated for very quickly. Secondly, it argues that the British labour movement is so strong as it is and so committed to parliamentary democracy, that it has little need for soviets, a workers? militia and all of the other, specifically proletarian, forms of democracy. All that is needed is a massive quantitative extension of existing democracy.

The ?Enabling Bill? is the centrepiece of Militant?s strategy. It is the fig-leaf covering its opportunism. Taaffe explains the purpose of the enabling legislation in these terms:

?It is for this reason that Militant, in opposition to the programme of piecemeal reforms of the supporters of the

Alternative Economic Strategy, have demanded that a Labour government introduce enabling legislation into the House of Commons to nationalise the 200 monopolies, with minimum compensation on the basis of proven need.? 9

Explicitly rejecting the accusation of 'parliamentary cretinism' Militant points to what is supposed to be the fundamental difference between the parliamentary cretinism of the reformists and the revolutionary decisiveness of the 'Marxist' parliamentarians'speed:

'The Labour Party education sheet states: 'The first few months of a Labour Government can be decisive. It is the time when essential legislation can be enacted'. We would say the first few days are decisive.' 10

In other words it is not so much a question of the nature or even purpose of such legislation which is crucial, but rather the period of time over which it is enacted. The possibility of success, or otherwise, of a fundamental socialist change is reduced to whether or not a future Labour government legislates quickly enough! With parliamentary nationalisation being equated with socialism, and rapid nationalisation being seen as crucial for success, the central role allotted to Parliament follows logically.

A revolutionary workers' government'based upon workers organised in factory committees, workers' councils and a militia'to actually expropriate the banks, factories and offices is accorded no place within this schema. This is not surprising given the precedents Militant uses to lend credence to its strategy. Clement Attlee, the Prime Minister in the 1945 Labour government, was the pioneer of the enabling strategy and Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath later fine-tuned it:

'Many others, including Attlee called for a new Labour government to introduce emergency or enabling legislation to dispense with parliamentary etiquette. Ironically the Heath government in February 1971 used enabling legislation to nationalise the bankrupt Rolls Royce in less than 24 hours.' 11

The only thing ironic about these historical parallels is that a paper calling itself Marxist can suggest that the way to achieve the most far reaching social transformation history has seen is to follow the example of a reformist leader who betrayed the socialist aspirations of the masses in 1945, and a Tory doing the bosses' bidding by bailing out an ailing company.

The truth is that the bosses had no fundamental objections to the nationalisations carried out by Attlee nor to Heath's rescue operation. It is unlikely in the extreme that the ruling class would sit back and allow parliamentary action, no matter how speedily it is carried out, to threaten their economic system, their wealth and their power, indeed, their very existence as a class. Violent and uncompromising opposition to such action would be launched by the bourgeoisie, and parliamentary niceties, including all the 'Enabling Bills' in the world, would not deter them in the slightest. It is the task of real Marxists to tirelessly warn the working class of this prospect now. Militant does not.

It shies away from the key task of the socialist revolution's earliest stage, the need to smash the bourgeois state'of which Parliament is one, important, constituent part'and replace it with a state of a new type, a state based on the direct organs of proletarian power. Instead the capitalist state is to be used to implement socialism on behalf of the working class. Of course, Militant talk about the mobilised power of the working class as a means of defending this brand of parliamentary socialism. All this means is that the working class bears the same relationship to the 'Marxist' parliamentary cretins as football supporters do to their team. They cheer them on, but do not take part in the match.

Smashing the state

Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky all vigorously fought against strategies for socialism that avoided the need to smash the capitalist state, and for reasons that hold good today. The capitalist state, including Parliament, is not class neutral. It exists as a direct consequence of class antagonisms. Its function is to regulate those antagonisms by defending the property, the economic system and the political power of the ruling class. It does this by coercing and oppressing the exploited. In the aftermath of the Paris Commune of 1871, when the working class had seized and briefly held onto political power in Paris, Marx recognised the significance of the event for proletarian strategy:

?The proletariat cannot, as the ruling classes and their various factions have done after their victory, simply take possession of the existing machinery and employ this ready made machinery for its own purposes.? 12

Marx went on to explain that it was necessary to smash the bureaucratic-military apparatus of the state. This led Lenin to conclude:

?The words ?to smash the bureaucratic-military machine? briefly express the principal lesson of Marxism regarding the tasks of the proletariat during a revolution in relation to the state.? 13

Engels argued that Marx once concluded that ?at least in Europe, England is the only country where the inevitable social revolution might be effected entirely by peaceful and legal means?.¹⁴ This is a well thumbed quote often used by Militant speakers against ?ultra-left sects? who argue that Britain needs a revolution.

Marx argued this in the mid-nineteenth century because in Britain the modern imperialist state, with its executive armed apparatus towering above Parliament, was underdeveloped. But the development of imperialism as a world system changed this. It was that famous ?ultra-left sectarian?, Lenin, who pointed out in 1917:

?Today, in Britain and America too ?the precondition for every real people?s revolution? is the smashing, the destruction of the ?ready-made state machinery? (made and brought up to ?European?, general imperialist, perfection in those countries in the years 1914-17).? 15

And as Engels reminded us, Marx himself:

? . . . certainly never forgot to add that he hardly expected the English ruling classes to submit, without a ?pro-slavery rebellion?, to this peaceful and legal revolution?.¹⁶

Marx, in other words, expected the British bosses to mount the equivalent of the American Civil War of 1861-65 if faced with an attempt to legislate socialism. Unlike Marx, Militant always ?forget to add? this. Given the existence of ruthless and highly trained agents of repression in modern Britain, to forget it now is criminal folly.

Parliament, even one of a high bourgeois democratic standard, which Britain?s Parliament is not, cannot be a vehicle for socialist revolution. The reason is straightforward. Its bourgeois nature flows, not simply from its historical development as one of the instruments of capitalist rule, but from its function within capitalist society. It exists to deliberate upon and to pass laws. It does not carry those laws out, nor does it interpret and enforce those laws. It is, in a nutshell, a talking-shop. Real power, in Britain as in every capitalist society, lies outside of Parliament.

At the level of the state it lies with the executive, the military general staff, the unelected judges and police chiefs and the top levels of the state bureaucracy, the unelected civil servants. At the level of the economy real power lies with the bankers and captains of industry, with the big corporations and finance houses. A law making body comprised of 650 individuals cannot, under any circumstances, break the hold of these centres of real power. Even if a left majority in Parliament began the process it could take hardly any steps along the road to socialism without recognising that the alternative to these centres of power lie with the revolutionary organisations of the proletariat.

Only an entirely new form of state, one based on the directly elected and permanently accountable councils of the working class, one based on a workers? militia and on those sections of the armed forces won to the side of the revolution, can square up to and defeat the combined power of the bourgeois state (which Engels observed was, in the last analysis, ?bodies of armed men?¹⁷) and the capitalists whose property and economy it defends. Only organs that combine legislative and executive tasks, ones that do not seal off democratic deliberation and decision making from implementation, can provide the basis for this state of a new type. Lenin, who understood parliamentary democracy for the sham it was, explained:

?The way out of parliamentarism is not, of course, the abolition of representative institutions and the elective principle, but the conversion of the representative institutions from talking shops into ?working bodies?. ?The Commune was to

be a working not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time? (Marx).

?A working not a parliamentary body??this is a blow straight from the shoulder at the present-day parliamentarians and parliamentary ?lap dogs? of Social Democracy! Take any parliamentary country, from America to Switzerland, from France to Britain, Norway and so forth?in these countries, the real business of ?state? is performed behind the scenes and is carried on by the departments, chancelleries and general staffs. Parliament is given up to talk for the special purpose of fooling the ?common people??.? 18

Proletarian institutions of power

And Lenin did not believe that the representative institutions of the proletariat could be parliamentary ones, even if they were stuffed full of ?Marxist MPs?. He recognised that a new, and specifically proletarian, representative institution had emerged. It was foreshadowed in the Commune and then erupted in the Russian Revolution. It was the Soviet:

?The proletariat cannot ?lay hold? of the ?state apparatus and set it in motion?. But it can smash everything that is oppressive, routine, incorrigibly bourgeois in the old state apparatus and substitute its own, new apparatus. The Soviets of Workers?, Soldiers? and Peasants? Deputies are exactly this apparatus.? 19

How far Militant has travelled away from genuine Marxism is testified to by its refusal, in any publication, to explain the need to smash the state and replace it with a state of a new type, one based on soviets. In relation to the state its programme goes no further than reforming the judiciary and the civil service. Thus, in place of people?s courts it calls for elected judges. In place of soviets as administrative bodies it calls for an elected civil service. Militant correctly demands the abolition of the House of Lords and the monarchy, but says nothing about the House of Commons itself, other than that MPs should receive a ?workers? wage?. With regard to capitalism?s most trusted guardians, the officer caste, Militant foolishly encourages the illusion that these reactionaries can be won over to the proletariat:

?It is not by attempting to influence one or two isolated figures, but by offering the perspective of a new society, that the officer caste can be neutralised, or sections?even a majority?won over to the side of working people.? 20

In essence the Militant programme in relation to the state is for the creation of a democratic republic, not a soviet one. And this democratic republic will be able to usher in socialism peacefully by nationalising the top 200 monopolies. This centrist recipe for social change is a utopia, a fantasy. It panders to the democratic illusions of the British labour movement while simultaneously giving a garbled expression of its socialist aspirations. Taaffe leaves us in no doubt about Militant?s commitment to democracy. He leaves out of consideration the Marxist dictum on the need to smash the state and create a new proletarian democracy, and urges instead a mere extension of already existing, bourgeois, democracy:

?Democracy is not some kind of optional extra for Marxism. Without the massive extension of democratic rights, which is only possible on the basis of a socialist plan, there can be no movement towards socialism.? 21

Evaded, in this bowdlerisation of Marxism, is the fact that the precondition for a socialist plan is the destruction of the capitalist state and the supersession of bourgeois democracy?its negation?by a qualitatively different and new form of democracy, proletarian democracy.

Having ditched the Marxist position on the state and revolution, having paraded parliamentary democracy as the key weapon for the British working class, Militant is obliged to sink ever further into the revisionist mire. It renounce, explicitly, the Marxist strategic goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Quoting Trotsky in 1940 on the prospects for a peaceful American revolution (prospects which he did not consider very likely) Militant argues:

?The only amendment we need to make to Trotsky?s statement, because the events of the last forty years have indelibly stained the term, is to change ?proletarian dictatorship? to ?proletarian democracy?. It was Marx who first raised the question of the ?dictatorship of the proletariat? to characterise the new workers? state based upon the involvement and consent of the majority?as opposed to the ?dictatorship of capital?. However, given the monstrous totalitarianism of

dictatorships that have arisen in Germany, Italy, Spain and also the Stalinist regimes, the connotations of totalitarian repression associated with the word 'dictatorship' have blotted out the meaning intended by Marx: 'predominant rule'. Today the correct term to capture the true meaning is 'workers' democracy'.? 22

As if it will make the slightest difference to the rapacious and brutal capitalist class, Militant tendency tries to prove its rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat by promising the bosses, in advance of the revolution, full democratic rights under socialism.23

Lenin in *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* described Kautsky's outpourings against the dictatorship of the proletariat in Bolshevik Russia as 'twaddle'. The same epithet applies to Militant's explanation for its rejection of this basic principle of Marxism. Like Kautsky these comrades rely on sleights of hand and what they hope is the reader's ignorance of real Marxism, in order to get away with its opportunism.

At the time Trotsky used the term in relation to America, fascism was almost two decades old in Italy, seven years old in Germany and had just triumphed in Spain. The Stalinist dictatorship had existed since 1928 and its brutality had become ever more apparent throughout the 1930s. Yet terminological embarrassment—the 'staining' of the word 'dictatorship'—did not prevent him from sticking steadfastly to the need for a revolutionary proletarian dictatorship. After all, according to this logic the bad press that certain terms get at the hands of bourgeois public opinion makers, should have led Trotsky to abandon calling himself a Bolshevik and a communist. He did not, nor do we. The pretended pedagogy in Militant's revisionism is mere cover.

The real meaning of its rejection of the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is its refusal to accept that the workers' state is not simply a democratic society. Socialist tasks can, and do, contradict the extension of democracy to the enemy class. The weapons of proletarian terror against that class will have to be used. The workers' state is a society in which the proletariat imposes—dictates—its will on the whole of society, suppressing democracy for the class enemy as and when the tasks of the revolution make that necessary. Dictatorship does not simply mean 'predominant rule', therefore. It does not simply mean 'workers' democracy'. It also, and inevitably, means coercion, by force of arms, of all those who attempt to undermine the workers' state economically, politically or militarily.

To merely equate the dictatorship with workers' democracy is to lull the masses to sleep, to blunt the need to make them recognise that force and, if necessary, revolutionary violence up to and including civil war and the 'red terror', are in all probability going to be required to preserve the existence of the workers' state. It is to lie to the working class about the tasks that are ahead of them.

Marx explained that the dictatorship of the proletariat was a historically necessary and inevitable stage in the advance towards a society in which classes and class exploitation are abolished altogether, a society in which the need to regulate class antagonisms will disappear as will the state itself. Lenin gave the dictatorship of the proletariat a concrete meaning and form on the basis of the experience of the Russian Revolution. As against Kautsky's liberal whining about the suppression of bourgeois democracy in Russia, Lenin insisted:

'... dictatorship does not necessarily mean the abolition of democracy for the class that exercises the dictatorship over other classes; but it does mean the abolition (or very material restriction, which is also a form of abolition) of democracy for the class over which or against which, the dictatorship is exercised.' 24

The proletarian dictatorship is a negation, to one degree or another, of democracy, precisely because democracy itself is not an abstraction. The question has to be asked, democracy for which class, and for what ends?

We say, in advance, that we will force the capitalists to accept the rule of the proletariat. We will imprison them and their representatives if, as we expect they will, they take up arms against the workers' state or engage in economic sabotage against it. We will pay no heed to any law in our repression against the capitalists except the supreme law of the defence of the revolution. As Lenin put it:

'The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is rule won and maintained by the use of violence by the proletariat

against the bourgeoisie, rule that is unrestricted by any laws.? 25

Bourgeois or workers? democracy?

This 'simple truth as plain as a pikestaff', as Lenin calls it, is rejected by Militant supporters because they fear the bourgeoisie will stigmatise them as anti-democratic. They think that the term 'proletarian dictatorship' will be misunderstood by workers with democratic illusions. Worse, they think the term has been 'indelibly stained'. By whom? The Communards, the revolutionary Bolsheviks, the Fourth International of Trotsky? No, by 'public opinion'. The bourgeoisie have a long history of stigmatising revolutionaries as anti-democratic. In the current epoch they have been helped in this by the monstrous bureaucratic dictatorship of Stalinism in the degenerate(d) workers' states.

In normal times capitalist control of the media and education means they can get many workers to buy the big lie that revolutionaries are anti-democratic and that the bourgeoisie are democracy's guardians. But, even on a strike picket line, communists can prove to workers in practice the need for the dictatorship. What else is the picket line but an attempt to dictate the will of the strikers to the bosses, their scabs and their police thugs? Through the mass meeting we reach a democratic decision, through the picket line we impose that decision.

We therefore defend the picket line as a means of coercion, and we argue for its military defence, even at the most elementary level of picket defence squads. This type of workers' action is central for the development of a revolutionary class consciousness inside the working class, far more central than the use of the 'mobilised power of the labour movement' to serve as an adjunct to the doings of a socialist MP.

We show in practice the way in which such action gives a glimpse of the needs of the class struggle at a more general level, a glimpse of the tasks confronting the class in society as a whole if it is to end the struggle for survival and replace it with an economy based on the fulfilment of human need. We break down the suspicions of workers about the supposed anti-democratic nature of revolutionaries and rouse them from their 'democratic' servility before the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

We defend proletarian democracy absolutely. But we give no pledges, in advance, to the bourgeoisie, except that we will smash their rule with all the weapons at our disposal. Does this sound dictatorial and authoritarian? Yes! Does it require the destruction of the British working class? faith in bourgeois democracy? Yes! But then revolution, unlike Militant's parliamentary road, is an authoritarian business which requires a break from all illusions in the neutrality of bourgeois democracy. Engels, anticipating Lenin, noted:

'A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is an act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon—all of which are highly authoritarian means. And the victorious party must maintain its rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries.' 26

The 'orthodox Marxists' of Militant may pay private homage to Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, but their public positions—the ones they peddle to the working class—are a million miles from the revolutionary essence of these great teachers, an essence voiced by Lenin's and Engels' pronouncements on the need for a forcible dictatorship of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie.

Peaceful schemas and revolutionary violence

The inexorable logic of Militant's parliamentarism and rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat is to disarm the working class on the question of revolutionary violence. The road to power is, it is fond of repeating, peaceful. Rob Sewell informs us:

'The truth is Marxists stand for a peaceful transformation of society. We no more want violence than we want to catch the plague.' 27

Put another way Sewell fears revolutionary violence like the plague. He fears it for the same reason he fears the term

‘proletarian dictatorship’. It offends public opinion, more precisely, it offends the reformist leadership of the Labour Party.

In accordance with their desire to appear ‘orthodox’ Militant attempts to prove that, like it, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were fully committed to a peaceful road to socialism. Sewell tries to draw a parallel between Militant’s conception of a peaceful road and Lenin and Trotsky’s arguments about the possibility of peaceful change in Russia in 1917:

‘[The] aim of the Bolsheviks in 1917 was to secure peaceful change in society. As late as 9 October 1917, Lenin was offering ‘to help to do everything possible to secure the last chance for a peaceful development of the revolution’. And later in the article he says ‘Having seized power, the Soviets could still at present’ and this is probably their last chance ‘secure a peaceful development of the revolution, peaceful elections of the deputies by the people, a peaceful struggle of parties inside the Soviets, a testing of the programmes of various parties in practice, a peaceful passing of power from one party to another’.’ 28

Throughout this entire quote from Lenin Sewell emphasises the word ‘peaceful’ which is repeatedly used. This, he believes, conclusively points to the totally ‘peaceful’ conception of the development of the revolution held by Lenin and thereby the Bolshevik leadership. By using this one quote out of context and ignoring some vital facts, however, Sewell is misleading his readers.

Consider the context in which for a short time Lenin believed it possible to develop the revolution peacefully. First, an insurrection had already taken place, in February 1917. The revolution’s first phase was violent, a fact overlooked by Sewell. Secondly the situation was abnormal in the sense that dual power existed. The soviets and factory committees were the real power in Russia, but they were tied by their Menshevik leaders to supporting the bourgeois Provisional Government. The balance of forces within the framework of dual power made the peaceful transfer of all power to the soviets a slim but realisable possibility:

‘At that time state power was unstable. It was shared by voluntary agreement between the Provisional Government and the soviets. The soviets were delegations from the mass of free ‘i.e. not subject to external coercion’ and armed workers and soldiers. What really mattered was that arms were in the hands of the people and that there was no coercion from without. That is what opened up and ensured a peaceful path for the progress of the revolution.’ 29

In other words, prior to the July Days and then again briefly after the Kornilov Coup, the fact of a dual power situation in which the workers had arms made a peaceful development possible. Precisely because Marxists do not advocate violence for its own sake Lenin tried to seize the momentary opportunity for peaceful development.

However, more important than such speculations on possibilities, the fact is that an insurrection proved necessary. Lenin fought for, and eventually won the Party to, the insurrectionary course and an uprising was staged. Militant gets around this fact by claiming that the Bolshevik government came to power through peaceful elections at the Congress of Soviets. Do the Militant theoreticians not know that the uprising was carried through by the Military Revolutionary Committee? On the basis of a Bolshevik majority in the Soviet Congress, this organisation led by the Bolsheviks forcibly overthrew the Provisional Government. We think they do know this, but will go to any lengths to try and disguise it from their supporters and from the British working class.

Of course, Taaffe and Sewell et al accept as a possibility the need to use force against a bourgeoisie that attacks the left Labour government of their schema. But by refusing to make clear to workers in advance the inevitability of such an attack they are doing a grave disservice to the cause of the revolution. Trotsky, writing on Britain, anticipated such dangerous nonsense and warned:

‘However, heroic promises to hurl thunderbolts of resistance if the Conservatives should ‘dare’, etc, are not worth a single bad penny. It is futile to lull the masses to sleep from day to day with prattling about peaceful, painless, parliamentary, democratic transitions to socialism and then, at the first serious punch delivered at one’s nose, to call upon the masses for armed resistance. This is the best method for facilitating the destruction of the proletariat by the

powers of reaction. In order to be capable of offering serious resistance, the masses must be prepared for such action mentally, materially and by organisation. They must understand the inevitability of a more and more savage class struggle, and its transformation, at a certain stage, into civil war.? 30

These words?every one of them?apply to Militant today. Instead of preparing for civil war its propagandists prattle about Parliament. And a graphic example of the practical consequences of this prattling was revealed in the miners? strike when Militant argued that the scab-herding, truncheon wielding police thugs were ?workers in uniform?. On a strike picket Militant?s line of march is to the right. How much more will this be the case when the task of insurrection is the order of the day?

As it is they play on an understandable desire by all civilised people to minimise violence, and transform it into a utopian schema for the peaceful road. Thus they constantly down-play the likelihood of vicious counter-revolutionary terror by the army, police, secret service and other agents of the bourgeoisie. In doing so they again abandon some central aspects of the Marxist tradition.

Certainly we are concerned to disorganise and paralyse the forces at the disposal of the bourgeoisie. That is, we want to smash the bourgeois state forces, and in the process win to our side the maximum number of rank and file soldiers. Marxists have developed tactics to be used to achieve just this. Trotsky in particular emphasised the necessity for such activity:

?A revolutionary uprising can hold on to victory only where it succeeds in cracking the firmest, most resolute and reliable detachments of reaction and attracting the remaining armed forces of the regime over to its side . . . [This] can only be achieved in a situation where the wavering government forces are convinced that the working masses are not simply demonstrating their discontent but have this time firmly made their mind up to overthrow the government at all costs, not baulking at the most ruthless means of struggle. Only this sort of impression will be capable of swinging the wavering forces over to the side of the people.? 31

Compare this to Militant?s schema whereby revolutionary activity to break the resistance of counter-revolutionary forces is restricted to the dissemination of abstract propaganda:

?Only by opening up new possibilities for the further development of society is it possible to exercise a powerful influence on the ranks of the army.? 32

Taaffe appears to have overlooked the fact that, as Trotsky pointed out, organised detachments of workers armed with rifles, guns and bombs can have a pretty ?powerful influence? too! But then having rejected the road of revolutionary violence the problem of breaking up the army recedes in importance. After all, getting more ?socialist? MPs elected is the real business of the British revolution.

Adapting to national pressures

Militant consistently refers to the Iranian revolution as the vindication of its position:

?If in Iran a much more powerful army was shattered by a movement of the working class how much more so would the hands of reactionary army generals be tied by a similar movement of the British working class?? 33

But what shattered the Iranian army was not an unspecific ?movement of the working class?. It was the combination of mass resistance with an armed insurrection. Far from having their hands ?tied? by the mass movement of the Iranian workers, Iran?s generals unleashed the Imperial Guard against the garrison of the left wing Air Force Cadets. With the assistance of the left wing guerrillas of the Fedayeen and Mojahedin the Cadets defeated the Guards. They then proceeded to distribute arms to the workers and urban poor of Tehran.

This was the decisive moment in the breaking of the Shah?s army. Perhaps this explains why Militant?s South African co-thinkers refer to the event as ?a brilliant?though quite exceptional?example of a victorious insurrection?.³⁴ But then

in South Africa Militant is not engaged in tailoring Marxism to reformist pacifism?rather to the popular frontist ANC and its armed wing, Umkhonto We Sizwe.

Not only does Militant retrospectively bless the armed insurrection for Iran. It has generously supplied those fighting in El Salvador's civil war with an orthodox prescription for the 'seizure of power by the proletariat' organised in 'workers' councils and soviets'. Such revolutionary verbiage, however, does not signify a 'healthy' aspect to British Militant. It is the biggest and most ideologically influential component of an international network of groups. Its politics predominate.

While Militant's editors may tolerate revolutionary schemas for other countries this tells us nothing other than that they are subject to profound national pressures within Britain. They have evolved a British road to socialism, one that excuses them from revolutionary responsibilities. This national pressure is working against their claims to be internationalist. Already, at the time of the Falkland/Malvinas War, they caved in to national pressure and called for a Labour government to continue the war against semi-colonial Argentina on a socialist basis?whatever that might mean. They will impose 'British roads' on their co-thinkers. They will pave the way for defeats with potentially tragic results for the working class.

So total is Militant's capitulation to British Labourism, so completely does it equate political power with bourgeois democracy, that Taaffe even wants to reclaim the outworn name adopted by Marxist parties before the First World War:

'A one stage the Marxists went under the name 'Social Democrats'. This term has now been stolen by the Liberals and Tories in disguise, the traitors who have split the Labour Party and formed the Social Democratic Party in Britain. The term 'Social Democrat' implied that the Marxists stood for socialism and democracy: they stood for the extension of democracy to the economy and society as a whole.' 35

Marx, Engels and Lenin took a different view of the name Social Democrat. As Engels explained, they refused to call themselves Social Democrats in 1848:

'... For Marx and myself it was therefore absolutely impossible to use such a loose term to characterise our special point of view. Today things are different, and the word [Social Democrat] may perhaps pass muster, inexact though it still is for a party whose economic programme is not merely socialist in general, but downright communist, and whose ultimate political aim is to overcome the whole state and, consequently democracy as well.' 36

After the betrayal of Social Democracy in 1914 Lenin argued that real Marxists had to 'cast off the soiled shirt' of Social Democracy and call themselves communists.³⁷ Marx called 'Social Democracy' 'a pig of a name, but quite good enough for this movement'.³⁸

If Militant wants to reclaim the name Social Democrat it is entitled to it. Militant has revised Marx and Lenin on the state, on Parliament, on insurrection, on the proletarian dictatorship. The name Social Democrat suits Militant's right-centrist politics far better than the label Marxist.

Therefore, to those supporters of Militant in Britain and to their co-thinkers internationally who are committed to a revolutionary solution to the crisis of leadership we say do not wait for right-centrism to fail the test of revolution, do not wait for its inevitable passage into the camp of reformism?turn to the Movement for a Revolutionary Communist International, authentic Trotskyists who, when it comes to the class struggle and revolution, in James P Cannon's words, 'mean business'.

Endnotes

1 Militant International Review (MIR) No22, p28 (our emphasis)

2 Ibid, p28

3 MIR No33, (our emphasis) p9

4 V I Lenin, The State and Revolution, Selected Works (SW) Vol 2, (Moscow 1975) p270

- 5 Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International, (London 1980) pp100-101
- 6 Ibid, p100 (original emphasis)
- 7 Ibid, p103 (original emphasis)
- 8 Ibid, p100 (our emphasis)
- 9 MIR No22, p28
- 10 MIR No33, p10 (original emphasis)
- 11 Ibid, p10
- 12 Marx and Engels, On the Paris Commune, p202
- 13 V I Lenin, op cit, p264
- 14 F Engels, Preface to the first English edition of Capital, Vol 1, November 1886, (Harmondsworth 1976) p113
- 15 V I Lenin, op cit, p265 (original emphasis)
- 16 F Engels, op cit, p113
- 17 F Engels, Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State, in Marx and Engels, Selected Works (1 volume, London 1968) p577
- 18 V I Lenin, op cit, p271
- 19 V I Lenin, ?Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power??. SW Vol 2, (Moscow 1975) p362
- 20 P Taaffe, The State, Militant Pamphlet, p42
- 21 MIR No22 p32
- 22 MIR No33, p11
- 23 MIR No22 p32
- 24 V I Lenin, The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky, SW Vol 3, (Moscow 1975) p22
- 25 Ibid, p23
- 26 Quoted in ibid p26
- 27 MIR No33, p10 (original emphasis)
- 28 Ibid p11
- 29 V I Lenin, ?On Slogans?, Collected Works 25, pp183-84
- 30 L Trotsky, Trotsky on Britain (New York 1973) p103
- 31 Ibid
- 32 P Taaffe, op cit, p41
- 33 Ibid, p32
- 34 Inqaba Ya Basebenzi No 16/17, Supplement (May 1985) p36
- 35 P Taaffe, op cit, p16
- 36 Quoted in V I Lenin, State and Revolution, SW, Vol 2 (Moscow 1967) p328
- 37 V I Lenin, SW, Vol 2 (Moscow 1975) p50
- 38 K Marx quoted in W Blumenberg, Karl Marx (London 1972) p142

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