



Political parties and the working class

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Political parties are organised bodies which have the goal of expressing common social interests and political conceptions concerning the organisation of the state, society and the economy. Therefore such parties seek to exercise state power directly or supervise the exercise of such power.

In class society it is necessarily the case that these common interests reflect class interests. For Marxists the political characterisation of a political party is ultimately determined by which class interests it objectively defends, irrespective of the subjective ideas, aspirations or social origins of the party leaders or members.

In capitalist society, divided as it is between the major classes of the bourgeoisie and the working class, this resolves itself into defence of, or opposition to, the bourgeois state and private property in the means of production. Any party which, in practice, defends that state and that private property is a bourgeois party.

Obviously, since each class is not restricted to one party, a given class may have various competing "vanguards", aspirants to its de facto leadership. Moreover, since classes are not homogeneous but consist of various sections whose interests may contradict one another, the open identification between parties and classes has a tendency to be obscured. Further, minority ruling classes have to rest on a mass base, mobilising it to defend themselves.

This necessitates compromises in terms of secondary programmatic questions and this is reflected in ideology. Thus, at least since the advent of universal suffrage in the imperialist countries (and in those semi-colonies with bourgeois democratic systems), bourgeois parties cannot consist exclusively, or even principally, of members of the bourgeoisie, but must include elements of subaltern classes, the urban petit-bourgeoisie, the peasantry and non-class-conscious workers, as their mass base. Moreover, a special caste of bourgeois politicians, linked to the "learned" professions, emerges to serve the bourgeoisie.

The wide spectrum of political parties which openly defend bourgeois private property is explained by these determinants in motion, that is, in conflict with the forces of antagonistic classes within the context of the capitalist system's own contradictions, its wars and economic crises.

Conservative, liberal and fascist parties all defend the bourgeois social order but in ways that differ and depend upon the rhythms of capitalist development and of the class struggle. In the case of the fascist party, defence of bourgeois private property as a whole, as the basis of capitalist society's production relations, can entail the political expropriation of the bourgeoisie's own political parties by the fascists, whose social base is petit-bourgeois and lumpenproletarian.

More, it can entail the material expropriation of elements of the bourgeoisie to better enforce the interests of the monopoly and finance-capital sections. For all its pseudo-radicalism and its annihilation of bourgeois democracy the ideology of fascism is, in Trotsky's words, a chemically pure distillation of imperialism, composed of all the putrid vapours of disintegrating bourgeois society.

Thus, although different political parties, with different social bases, can serve the interests of the bourgeoisie all of them have one thing in common. In government they are obliged to act within the framework of, and defend the bourgeois state. Whilst petit-bourgeois or aristocratic, liberal or fascist politicians can govern, the bourgeoisie, through its state, rules. In the last analysis the class character of such governments is always bourgeois.

As we shall see, this can apply equally to parties whose mass social base is the working class. In the countries where a clear majority of the population is proletarian, the bourgeoisie is forced to co-opt the proletariat into an acceptance of its continued exploitation: "In a developed capitalist society, during a 'democratic' regime, the bourgeoisie leans for support primarily upon the working classes, which are held in check by the reformists. In its most finished form, this system finds its expression in Britain during the administration of the Labour Government as well as during that of the Conservatives."

A relatively prosperous capitalism diverts part of its super-profits obtained from imperialist exploitation into granting enough immediate reforms to enable the workers' leadership to be "bought off" and to function as bourgeois agents. In the USA since the First World War, the prosperity and world hegemony of American finance and monopoly capital has been such that the labour leaders, the AFL-CIO bureaucrats, have been able to tie the working class to an openly bourgeois party, the Democrats, and to capitalist politicians who are "friends of labour" such as Hubert Humphrey and Edward Kennedy.

A similar situation existed in Britain between 1869 and 1900, during the unchallenged hegemony of British capitalism in the world market. Such parties as the nineteenth century Liberals, or the present day Democrats, whilst they may include a considerable degree of social reform in their programmes in order to buttress their claim to be "democratic", are not what we would characterise as "reformist parties".

Their success is based upon the limitation of the working class' consciousness of its own interests to the purely economic level, that is upon its failure to attain political class consciousness. The situation is rather different with those parties-the social democratic, Labour and Stalinist parties-that we do characterise as "reformist". To understand the significance of the difference it is necessary to re-assert the Marxist analysis of working class consciousness and its development.

The proletariat is created as an objective class by the development of capitalism. It is an essential productive force of the capitalist mode of production. It was within the very production relations of capitalism that Marx located the fundamental reason why workers could be receptive to an ideology that accepted bourgeois society as not only the "natural order" of things but one in which they could realise their own interests. The root of this was the apparent equality of the partners to the wage contract, worker and capitalist: "All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystification of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism's illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance [the wage form] discussed above, which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation."

In reality, however, the individual worker is too weak even to ensure that labour power is actually exchanged for an equivalent value in terms of wages. From very early in its existence, therefore, the working class is obliged to adopt forms of collective organisation to enforce, at least, a more equitable exchange.

Continued repetition of this struggle, this "guerrilla warfare" as Marx termed it, brings into existence permanent organisations, trade unions, which constitute a first step towards organisation of the proletariat as a class "in itself". This organisation of the class becomes an essential first step towards its organisation "for itself", towards consciousness of itself as a class.

Yet this by no means entails a complete rejection of capitalism. Indeed, any success in improving wages and conditions can reinforce the belief that the working class can be reconciled to capitalism. Trade unionism, whilst it poses the existence of the working class, recognises that class only as an economic category of capitalism, not as a class whose historic interest lies in the destruction of capitalism.

As such, trade unions can be, and often are, anti-socialist. Lenin angularly and correctly stressed this in the famous and still contentious passage of *What is to be done?*: "The spontaneous working class movement is trade unionism, is 'nur Gewerkschaftlerei' and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie."

It is necessarily the case that this enslavement is greatly weakened where the bourgeoisie are forced, by the demands of their system, to resist the attempts of the trade unions to improve wages and conditions. Where the bourgeoisie use all the forces available to them, including the power of the state, to enforce the highest possible rate of exploitation, the living experience of the class limits acceptance of bourgeois ideology.

Conversely, where the bourgeoisie can concede reforms to the working class or important sections of it, this can reinforce the domination of bourgeois ideology over the working class. Further, the very "success" of trade unionism in winning reforms leads to the creation within the labour movement of a caste of specialists in negotiation, the trade union bureaucracy.

This caste relies for its social existence on the continued existence of capitalism and its politics are those of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie. It has no inherent need to create its own political party. Where its interests, or those of its membership, require governmental action, it is content to form alliances with elements of the bourgeoisie that it defines as "progressive" or "friends of labour."

However, for such a situation to obtain over a lengthy period requires a capitalism which is so prosperous, and has such a great advantage over its rivals, that it can afford to systematically "buy off" both the leaders of the working class and significant sections of the class itself. This was the case with nineteenth century Britain and is so with present day America. In such circumstances it is not only the bureaucrats who are "bought" by the bourgeoisie.

Whole layers of the workers themselves, especially the skilled workers in strategically important industries or industries able to generate above average profit rates as a result of imperialist domination of the world, can be bribed with better than average wages and conditions by the bourgeoisie.

This can lead not only to relative social passivity on their part but to outright support for imperialist policy and identification with the interests of the imperialist state both against workers of other nationalities and, indeed, against other sections of the proletariat in "their own" countries. In this way, in imperialist countries, the labour bureaucracy and "workers' aristocracy" together form a powerful transmission belt for bourgeois ideology into the very heart of the working class, into its best organised sections.

Yet such a development is itself not without its contradictions. The success of trade unionism among the "aristocratic" layers forms a model for other layers who learn from it the importance of organisation, collective action and solidarity, since even the "aristocrats" have to wrest their privileges from the bourgeoisie.

Equally the internal development of capitalism leads previously unimportant or unprofitable industries to develop into pace-setting and highly profitable ones. Consequently its workers are able to enforce higher wages, to rise into the labour aristocracy. Another section may find their industry going into decline, may find that technological innovation undermines their position and they are forced to try to defend their past gains.

In such circumstances the contradictory nature of trade unionism is revealed. Although it accepts capitalism objective developments force it to fight capitalism. Trade unionism, once established, cannot limit itself to bargaining with individual employers. The enforcement of minimum standards of protection, safety, length of working day, for all trade unionists and, by implication for all workers, requires legislative action and, therefore, political representation of the working class.

In such a situation the preferred tactic of the trade union bureaucracy is to seek an alliance with one or another faction within the bourgeoisie whose interests they believe are not threatened by the proposed reforms. This section they label "the progressives". However, where the capitalist class as a whole is unwilling to concede reforms without a serious fight and where there are no "friends of labour" to "represent" the class, or where working class pressure for reform is so great that an open alliance with such bourgeois politicians becomes impossible, it becomes necessary to create a political party to campaign for, and initiate, reform legislation.

Whether this takes place as a result of the pressure for reforms from an already established trade union movement, as

was the case in Britain, or whether the fight for trade union rights is itself a component of the formation of such a party, as in Germany, such a party is a workers' party.

That is, it comes into existence as an expression of the interests of the working class and its recognition of its need for independent political representation. In this respect the formation of such a party is an historic step forward in the political development of the working class. It is a step which has always been resisted by the bourgeoisie who, recognising the potential threat inherent within independent working class political organisation, have even been driven in certain circumstances to take the most extreme measures to destroy such organisations.

The politics of such a party, however, are neither produced spontaneously nor are they determined by some inner logic. Leaving aside external pressures, they are the results of the clash of conflicting forces within the class itself and the results of the particular interests of sections and elements of other classes which have integrated themselves into the workers' party.

Should such a party succumb to the politics of class collaboration, best represented by the trade union bureaucracy, then its politics will subordinate working class interests to the preservation of the bourgeois order. In this case the highest aspiration of such a party will be the struggle for reforms within bourgeois democracy.

It will be a reformist party whose politics are entirely bourgeois in character. Nonetheless, its social base will remain different from that of other bourgeois parties. It will still be identified in the minds of millions of workers as "their party", the "party of the trade unions" or "the workers' party".

However, in periods of relative class peace, particularly when Social Democracy is in government, another tendency comes to the fore. Social Democracy is decreasingly regarded by its mass base as a "workers party" and more and more as a liberal reform or "peoples party", i.e. as a party of social reform which stands "above classes" and denies the class struggle. To most working class and petit bourgeois voters it may appear merely as the party which is most sympathetic to "ordinary people".

Indeed this is just how the reformist leaders present their parties to the electorate. Such developments do not alter our basic position on such parties. Even in a period when such attitudes become ever more a mass phenomenon the fundamental contradiction, between the working class basis of the party and its bourgeois politics, continues to exist.

Whichever tendency is uppermost in any given period, class struggle leading to more pronounced class identification or class peace and the consequent loss of it, we call such parties "bourgeois workers' parties", a term conveying their contradictory nature. This does not mean that both sides of the contradiction have equal weight and that reformist parties have a "dual nature".

On the contrary, the political characterisation of any party is determined by which class property relations it ultimately defends, and by this criterion, reformist parties are entirely bourgeois. The term "workers" is derived from the sociological composition of the largest part of its membership, supporters and electorate.

This characterisation can be applied to both social democratic reformist parties (those having their historical origins within the Second International) and Stalinist reformist parties (those having their origin in the Third International, and which continued, up to the crisis and collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the 1989-1991 period, to regard the USSR and the degenerate workers' states as qualitatively progressive as against bourgeois states). In both cases these parties differ from other bourgeois parties fundamentally through their continuing organic links with the working class.

Such links are evidenced by, for example, mass individual working class membership, readership of newspapers, youth organisations and open identification with, or fractions within, the trade unions. In the case of parties such as the British Labour Party which owe their creation to trade union political initiatives, the direct affiliation of trade unions to the party constitutes the principal mass base of the party.

In all cases bourgeois workers' parties continue to represent that original impulse towards political independence of the

working class and this has to be defended by revolutionaries against any attempts by the bourgeoisie to destroy these parties.

Despite their countless betrayals of the interests of the working class these parties remain a creation of the class. They have, nonetheless, been deformed, twisted and redirected into the very opposite of a force for class independence. They have become instruments of the bourgeoisie for ruling the working class and negating its political independence.

Such a transformation, however, is by no means inevitable. Where reformist consciousness comes to dominate a workers' party this is inextricably linked to the development and consolidation of a caste of bureaucrats in both the trade unions and the party. This caste, in addition to being a constant source of bourgeois ideology within the ranks of the workers' movement, is also a real material force in its own right.

Full-time functionaries of the unions and the party are systematically incorporated into bourgeois society. Through co-optations into government commissions, the boards of nationalised industries and committees of experts, through entry into the machinery of local government and election to town councils, by entry into parliament and, ultimately, by cabinet seats in their "own" or coalition governments, such individuals obtain the connections and the power to control the unions and the party.

Having made its own peace with capitalist society, this caste uses its power to enforce acceptance of the bourgeoisie's needs upon the memberships of the party and unions. Its members are the gendarmes of capital within the workers' movement, and its first line of defence against possible encroachments by the workers' movement upon bourgeois society. For communists, defeating the hold of reformism over the working class is integrally combined with the defeat and overthrow of this bureaucracy.

A revolutionary understanding of reformism, then, must encompass both the recognition of its counter-revolutionary, bourgeois character and its origins as a creation of the working class in the class struggle. Reformist parties, consequently, are organisations with which the working class seeks to defend or extend its immediate interests within bourgeois society. Thus Trotsky called the social democracy, "the party that leans upon the workers but serves the bourgeoisie".

This emphasises its bourgeois political character. It was not however any paradox for him also to say that these parties, along with the trade unions, were "bulwarks of workers' democracy within the bourgeois state". By this he recognised that the workers utilise the reformist party and organisations to press for improvements in their social, economic and political conditions and rights within capitalism. They use these parties as defensive positions against attacks by the capitalist state.

They are indeed weak and ultimately ineffective "bulwarks" against any decisive attempt by the bourgeoisie to destroy the workers' gains under capitalism, but they are bulwarks nonetheless and, therefore, an enraged and desperate bourgeoisie will attempt to destroy them as obstacles to its rule, (Germany 1933, Spain 1936, Chile 1973). Nor are the contradictions of the reformist organisations simply logical or analytical features.

They exist in real life and are of the very essence of reformism. Without its real roots in the working class, reformism would be of no use to the bourgeoisie. Without its commitment to the maintenance of the bourgeois order, the same reformism would not be the obstacle to working class progress that it has become.

Confusion, and as a result, incorrect political tactics, have flowed from exclusive emphasis on one or the other side of the dialectic which is expressed in the term "bourgeois workers' party". Those "revolutionaries" who are guided by an empiricist method, a method deeply ingrained at least in the "Anglo-Saxon" countries, remain perplexed by the multifarious and changing "appearances" of social democracy. As a result they draw useless, one-sided generalisations extrapolated undialectically from whichever element of its contradictory nature reformism exhibits in any given period or situation.

In certain periods since the degeneration of the Fourth International, "Trotskyists" have based their analysis of social

democracy predominantly on its working class origins and support. They concluded that these were "workers' parties", capable of evolution towards consistent working class politics, and embracing "socialist policies".

The only obstructions were the "bourgeois leaders", who had to be replaced, and the bureaucratic organisational structures that had to be "reformed", "renovated" or "democratised". Alternatively, in other periods, when faced with the conservative and thoroughly bourgeois Labour and social democratic governments of the 1960s and 1970s with their onslaughts on civil liberties, trade union rights, their racism and their slavishly pro-imperialist foreign policies, "Trotskyists" concluded that these parties were pure and simple "bourgeois parties".

They buttressed their conclusion with statistics which showed the withered organisational ties between the party and the working class or the declining electoral support among the working class.

The tactical fruits of these analyses were, in the former case, a slavish adaptation as the "Trotskyists" attempted to "relate" to left currents in social democracy or, in the second case, a wooden, abstract denunciation and abstention from contact with the Labour and social democratic parties. These two, equally false, positions are not mutually exclusive. Over a period of time the same "Trotskyist" groups have zig-zagged from one to the other.

What unites them is the absolute inability to fight the social democracy with the principled tactics of the communist tradition. In order to avoid such mistakes it is necessary for revolutionaries to be absolutely clear, in the first instance, on the political characterisation of reformist parties as bourgeois parties. Only then is it possible to comprehend the way in which the execution of a pro-bourgeois policy can be conditioned by the proletarian origins and social roots of reformism.

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