What is to be done? - The question economism can?t answer

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Many members of the Socialist Workers Party have heard their organisation accused of ?economism?. But what does it mean exactly? In this article from 1990 Clare Heath looks at the origin of this term in Lenin?s polemics at the turn of the century and ?nds that it is an accurate label for the SWP?s approach to struggles as diverse as the strike against Heath?s Tory government in the 1970s to the Poll Tax battle of the late 1980s.

Most of the SWP?s left wing critics level the charge of economism at them. But the failure of these self same critics to orient themselves in the largest mass workers? organisations?the trade unions?has discredited this correct charge. When the student vanguardists, the feminists and the Trotskyist-Bennites demonstrate, in words and deeds, their aversion for the ?backward, white male skilled working class? they completely undermine their criticism of the SWP.

Indeed their ?politics? are simply the obverse side of the coin of the SWP. In different ways both represent a ?slavish bowing to spontaneity?. Lenin?s charge against the economist trend in the Russian Social Democracy.

The SWP theoreticians have a holy terror of Lenin?s pamphlet What Is To Be Done?. In the SWP ?Economism? is caricatured as ?opposition to building a revolutionary party? or the ignoring of political questions.

Since the SWP is not guilty of either of these they insist they cannot be accused of economism. Cliff attempts to discredit What Is To Be Done? by claiming that Lenin ?overemphasised the difference between spontaneity and consciousness?, that Lenin?s supposed ?complete separation of spontaneity and consciousness is mechanical and non-dialectical? and that Lenin later admitted this to be the case.

Cliff wishes to hold fast to the proposition that ?an economic demand, if it is sectional, is de?ned as ?economic? in Marx?s terms. But if the same demand is made of the state, it is political?. Cliff asserts the internal evolutionary logic of the economic struggle:

?In many cases economic (sectional) struggles do not give rise to political (class wide) struggles, but there is no Chinese wall between the two, and many economic struggles do spill over into political ones.? (Tony Cliff, Lenin vol 1, p80-82)

Duncan Hallas, writing in 1973 explains this with respect to the events of 1972:

?Thus the builders? strike was an economic movement: the strike to free the Pentonville Five, a political movement, a successful non-sectional struggle to coerce the ruling class. But the origin of the Pentonville struggle was the Midland Cold Store dispute; a very economic, very sectional dispute?an attempt to protect
the jobs of registered dockers against cheaper labour. The economic struggle led, in this case, to a political struggle and generally speaking this is usually how political, class wide actions?other than purely electoral ones?develop.? (International Socialism, No 56, ?rst series)

From this supposed law of development Hallas asks and answers the question:

?How do revolutionary socialists get into positions, gain the authority, that commands a hearing? By serious, active and persistent struggle on these issues that actually concern their fellow workers, maintained consistently over time. And these issues will be economic issues, sectional issues, issues of conditions, bonuses, gradings, wage rates and, at one remove, union politics.?

For Hallas this means concentrating on giving a ?better, more successful, lead on the concrete day to day, bread and butter issues, than their non-revolutionary fellows.? There is no fear that this will make revolutionaries indistinguishable from pure and simple trade union militants because of an inherent logic propelling economic struggles into political ones; a logic provided by government intervention into the economic sphere (via ?incomes policy?, police on the picket line, anti-union laws etc, etc). Thus Hallas concludes:

?This political struggle can be carried through only on the basis, in the ?rst place, of economic struggles, of sectional struggles. No magic general slogans can replace clear, realistic and concrete leadership in these sectional struggles. The central slogans have to arise from these and generalise them.?

Now economism is not the ?absence of politics?. Lenin makes this clear in What Is To Be Done? The economist ? . . . does not altogether repudiate the political struggle.? Lenin cites economist writings that talk about ?combating the government?. Lenin however points out that the economist believes that ?politics always obediently follows economics?. He continues:

?If by politics is meant Social Democratic politics [i.e. socialist or communist politics] then the theses of [the economists] are utterly incorrect. The economic struggle of the workers is very often connected with bourgeois politics, clerical politics etc. [The economists] theses are correct, if by politics is meant trade union politics, viz the common striving of all workers to secure from the government measures for alleviating the distress to which their conditions give rise, but which do not abolish that condition, i.e. which do not remove the subjugation of labour to capital.?

Lenin concludes:

?There is politics and and politics. Thus we see that [the economists? position] does not so much deny the political struggle as it bows to its spontaneity, to its unconsciousness. While fully recognising the political struggle, which arises spontaneously from the working class movement itself, it absolutely refuses independently to work out a specifically Social Democratic politics . . .?

**Spontaneity and consciousness**

Lenin notes the economists? charges against the Iskra tendency of ?setting up their programme against the movement.? Against this he replies that it is the task of Marxists to:

?. . . raise the (spontaneous) movement to the level of ?its programme?. Surely it is not its function to drag at the tail of the movement.?

Lenin in no way denies that the working class? ?spontaneity??i.e. the militancy that grows out of the very conditions and struggles that arise from its exploited position under capitalism?develops class
consciousness. Nor does he deny that the economic struggle has a ?spontaneous? tendency towards politics. What he does say in the famous and wilfully misunderstood quotation is that:

?Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.? (our emphasis)

This quotation, along with Lenin?s observation that ?there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement?, draws attention to the fact that the creation of a workers? movement with socialist consciousness, and a socialist programme is a conscious, active task, not a ?spontaneous? one.

The raising of spontaneous class struggle, whether ?economic? or ?political?, into socialist consciousness is an indispensable task and one which only a vanguard party can undertake.

None of this is in contradiction with a correct appreciation of the revolutionary creativity of the masses. But if workers spontaneously engage in epic class struggles, spontaneously create soviets and spontaneously erupt into insurrection they also?and necessarily for longer periods?spontaneously succumb to bourgeois ideology. Lenin?s attack is on those who tail the economic struggle and who, in the name of ?spontaneity?, denigrate socialist class consciousness. He attacks those who will not develop a specifically socialist programme, strategy and tactics and will not struggle to win the ?mass movement? to it, to raise the struggle from the ?day-to-day bread and butter issues? (Hallas).

Cliff likes to pretend that Lenin left all the immature nonsense of What Is To Be Done? behind once he had seen the mass movement of 1905. These words from that year refute him:

?We cannot be be content to have our tactical slogans limp behind events and to their being adapted to events after their occurrence. We must have slogans that lead us forward, light up the path before us, and raise us above the immediate tasks of the movement. To wage a consistent and sustained struggle the party of the proletariat cannot determine its tactics from occasion to occasion. In its tactical decisions it must combine ?delity to the principles of Marxism with due regard for the progressive tasks of the proletariat.? (?Revolution teaches?, 1905)

The SWP?s objection to What Is To Be Done? is, in essence, their objection to Leninism itself. Once (before 1968) this was overt and consistent. The IS objected to the democratic centralist party structure which was the organised expression of the Leninist method of theoretical, political and economic struggle. Yet Cliff?s later acceptance of the formalities and terminology of Leninism hides a deep hostility to its programme and method.

Of a piece with this is the SWP?s rejection of Trotsky?s and the Communist International?s utilisation of transitional demands. Thus Duncan Hallas objects to the Transitional Programme. He quotes Trotsky?s famous statement that:

?It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to ?nd the bridge between present demands and the socialist programme of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today?s conditions and from today?s consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one ?nal conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.? And then he goes on with condescending irony:

?Whether or not it is possible to ?nd slogans or ?demands? that meet these exacting speci?cations
depends, very obviously on circumstances. If at a given time today’s consciousness of wide layers? is
decidedly non-revolutionary, then it will not be transformed by slogans. Changes in actual conditions are
needed. The problem at each stage is to nd and advance those slogans which not only strike a chord in
at least some sections of the class (ideally of course, the whole of it) but which are also capable of leading
to working class actions. Often they will not be transitional in terms of Trotsky’s very restricted de

Of course Trotsky cannot be held responsible for the tendency of most of his followers to fetishize the
notion of transitional demands, and even the speci?c demands of the 1938 programme?most obviously the
?sliding scale of wages?. The emphasis he gave to this matter was, however, excessive and encouraged
the belief that ?demands? have some value independently of revolutionary organisation of the working
class. ? (Trotsky’s Marxism, p104)

Behind the SWP?s hostility to ?slogans and demands?, especially transitional ones, lies their total inability
to see beyond the horizon of the immediate economic or trade union political struggles. Thus they present
themselves as specialist advisers on action (invariably militant trade union tactics), on generalisation,
(solidarity action between sectional struggles up to, but no further than ?mass strike action?) and on
organisation (where they advocate joining the party to link together the rank and ?le militants.)

Agitation and propaganda

Traditionally the SWP therefore attempts to avoid political issues that are not immediately posed in working
class economic struggle. Either they try to ignore questions such as Ireland, women and race altogether, or
if that will not work then they trim their positions to keep them in line with prevalent consciousness.

They did this on Ireland for example, when they refused to call for the withdrawal of British troops when
Labour originally sent them in. They denounced the 1972 Aldershot bombings as ?individual terrorism?
despite their formal position of unconditional but critical support for the IRA. The alternative to this in the
SWP leaders? book is to set up a ?separate? campaign or paper on the issue to keep in with those
concerned about. That is what happened with Women?s Voice and the Anti-Nazi League, for example.

The agitation of the SWP consists of ?calls to action? to continue and step up existing struggles with
realistic, i.e. immediately realisable, goals. Alongside this the SWP maintains a separate diet of
propaganda aimed at exposing the evils of capitalism and presenting necessarily abstract arguments for
socialism and workers? control.

Agitation and propaganda occupy the distinct and separate terrains of ?action now? and passive education
for the ?Great day a?commin? precisely because the SWP rejects the method and tradition represented by
the Transitional Programme. It has no programme to take the working class from its present struggles to
the creation of workers? power. They once produced a draft programme but it never got beyond the
internal bulletin.

In reality their programme is split into a maximum/minimum one, as much as that of the traditional social
democracy. There is only one major difference; the Social Democratic minimum programme glorifies the
terrain of electoral politics and leaves economic struggle as the exclusive business of the unions.

The SWP does the exact reverse. The SWP loyalists will object that they stress the ?self-activity?, the
direct action, the do-it-yourself approach. This is true but when sectional trade union militancy, or even
mass direct action for trade union political ends, develops to the fullest extent it indeed poses questions
such as the political general strike, who rules in society, and how to really deprive the bosses of political
and economic power.
Only the socialist programme contains the answer to these questions. This answer is not an abstract one of socialism, but a series of demands, methods of organisation, and goals of struggle, which go further than the existing everyday demands and slogans of the movement. Communist propaganda has to prepare the ground for the fight for these demands and slogans. If these answers are not given, if these slogans are not raised, if a new leadership does not emerge on the basis of a strategy and tactics which are a leap forward for the class, then bourgeois answers will be given by the existing union and Labour leaders.

That this is the case is shown by the fact that the spontaneous continuation of the militant struggles of the early 1970s was the Labour Government of 1974. In this period of militant trade union struggles, both political and economic, the International Socialists (IS) were unable and unwilling to offer an independent action programme which led from these remarkable struggles (the Kill the Bill strikes and demonstrations, the builders?, postal workers?, and two miners? strikes and the mass political strike over the Pentonville jailings) to the question of working class power. Instead they tailed every one of these struggles claiming each would bring down the Tories.

Thus after the miners? stirring victory over the Tories in early 1972, after mass pickets and widespread solidarity action had demonstrated a mass class hostility to the Tories, the IS were still trying to keep the struggle at its existing economic level and even at its existing sectional level. True they lent the struggle itself a political character?. They said that the struggle had a political character, but offered no more this that comforting description.

Rejection of transitional demands

A typical front page of Socialist Worker in the 1972 miners? strike?under the bold headline ?Demand the TUC calls a general strike??said:

?If the miners do not win their full claim, demand that the TUC calls a one day general strike of all affiliated unions against the Tory lockout.? (Socialist Worker No 259, 19.2.72)

When, after the 1972 victory, the miners were in the ring line again the SWP was still tailing, and indeed advocating tailism for most of the working class:

?The powerful battalions of the trade unions can organise to smash Phase Three. They can blast a hole through which every other section can march. It is a defeat which this Tory government of riches for the few and misery for the many could not survive.? 

During the Pentonville jailings in mid-1972 the IS did not manage to call for a general strike until after the TUC had threatened to call one. And even then, true to form they avoided like the plague the ?political? and ?too advanced? slogan of a general strike to smash the Industrial Relations Act.

Faced with rampant double figure inflation in this period Socialist Worker could not get beyond ?Pay: use your muscle for more!?. It again renounced, cursing with bell, book and candle, the sliding scale of wages because such a slogan, if granted (a big if indeed!), might put a stop to the wages? struggle.

In fact if the working class, or even substantial sections, took up and fought for this generalised, class wide slogan on wages, it would have been a clearly political slogan. Even if in exceptional circumstances it had been conceded it would have been a ceaseless bone of contention with a government and an employing class determined to lower wages and bring down inflation at the workers? expense.

Forms of the sliding scale have been fought for, won and fought over in massive struggles in Italy, Belgium
and the USA. Even Heath’s indexation fraud linked to the last phase of his incomes policy, and preserved by Labour, when triggered by inflation rates far in excess of the threshold Heath had thought safe, led to a rash of strikes by poorly organised, often women, workers. Here again the actual spontaneity of the workers proved to be more advanced than the tailism of the IS.

Above all what the Clifte economist schema fails to realise is that the vacuum it leaves, where there should be the fight for a communist action programme—including as well as transitional demands, immediate economic and political (democratic) ones—is led in life by reformism. Thus the SWP has no alternative, even at the pinnacle of struggle, except to grind its teeth and vote Labour with no illusions.

Economism is helpless when faced with bourgeois politics in the working class, which in Britain takes the form of Labourism. The SWP hates it, curses it, wishes it dead and develops theories to prove that it is. Yet each time the SWP thinks that the Hercules of working class self-activity has hurled it to the ground (the early 1970s) it rises up again with renewed force, even temporarily subduing the economic struggle.

The SWP cannot comprehend that this is because political reformism is the true born son of the trade union struggle. It renews its strength constantly from it. The miners’ militancy put Wilson and Benn into ofce in 1974. They then turned on the miners and did all they could to ensure that never again would they?nd themselves returned to ofce in such an extra-parliamentary fashion.

But it is also true that illusions in Labour and electoralism are not just a product of trade union victories. It also occurs as a result of serious defeats. Witness the Great Miners’ Strike of 1984-85. The Labour Party leadership in its majority ran away for the duration of the dispute. They were embarrassed by it; they worked behind the scenes to get it called off.

But once the miners were defeated then the vanguard gradually became infected with new realism and disillusion set in about the possibilities of victories against the Tories on the industrial/trade union front of the class war. In turn, working for a Labour victory, even with much reduced expectations in what it will do in ofce, became the order of the day. It was, and is more and more, accepted that only a Labour victory at elections will stand a chance of unseating Thatcher.

The Downturn

In order to justify their economism the SWP have constructed a theoretical and perspectival alibi; the downturn theory. A report from a party council in May 1990 summarised its essence. It stated that there was an upturn of struggle from 1970 to 1974:

?Then from 1975 onwards there was a downturn both in the industrial struggle and in left wing politics.? To use one of Cliff’s favourite phrases, the downturn theory was bloody rubbish. It bore no relation to the reality of the 1970s and 1980s. How is it possible for people who have lived through those years to describe them as ones of industrial downturn?

We witnessed mass struggles under Labour (notably the strikes of car workers, lorry drivers and whole swathes of the public sector in 1978 and 1979). Under the Tories some of the most momentous strikes in British labour movement history took place. Engineers, steel workers, health workers, civil servants, miners, printers, seafarers and dockers have all done battle in this period. The miners’ one year struggle was a milestone of working class militancy.

Yet the SWP insist that because of the downturn these strikes were doomed to defeat. We are clear that the key battles did go down to defeat. This has produced periods in which militancy has been considerably
subdued. But none of this was inevitable. The struggle itself threw up the possibility of victory. The reformist misleadership consistently squandered that opportunity. Correct and vigorous revolutionary politics, intersecting with the rank and file militancy of these disputes, could, on various occasions, have prevented defeat. Such is the dialectic of the living struggle. Its outcome is not predetermined by the arbitrary perspectival schema of a left group.

Faced with this reality the SWP stretched the downturn theory to the point of incredulity. During the miners' strike Tony Cliff argued:

?The miners? strike is an extreme example of what we in the Socialist Workers Party have called the ?downturn? in the movement.? This absurd position was justified by the fact that the strike was a defensive one—it was defending jobs. Yet the occupation of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilding yard, which according to Cliff ?radically turned the tide of the Tory attack? in 1971, was equally defensive. It came just after the defeat of two national groups of workers?power workers and postal workers. Why was this not an extreme example of a ?downturn??

Many strikes in many periods are defensive, yet they can rally the forces for a ?ghtback, turn the tide from retreat to advance, alter the balance of class forces. There was nothing inherent in the struggle of the UCS workers, led as they were by treacherous Stalinists who tried to turn it into a popular frontist jamboree, that made it an ?upturn? strike. Nor was there anything inherent in the miners? strike that meant defeat was the inevitable outcome.

What was a problem was that, as a result of their false perspective, the SWP argued vigorously that it was impossible to organise the rank and file in the disputes of the later 1970s and 1980s. They had decided to wind up every one of their rank and file organisations and vowed not to get involved in any other ones?such as the National Rank and File Miners? Movement that emerged from the Great Strike. This meant that the misleadership of the reformists went unchallenged by an organisation that had, at least in the past, developed extensive roots inside the working class. The SWP in 1984 insisted that:

?What is clear is that the idea that you could create an alternative leadership in the downturn by revolutionaries coming together in some kind of rank and file organisation did not work.? In place of this the SWP retreated in on itself. It structured its organisation around branch meetings with a high educational content to steel members against the corrosive effects of the downturn. All of this avoided the real problem of both the class struggle in the 1980s and the SWP?s politics within the rank and file organisations that they were winding up. The problem was not an absence of class struggle nor an unwillingness of rank and file workers—who were not yet revolutionaries—to organise themselves against the bureaucracy. The strikes of the 1980s demonstrate both the extent of rank and file militancy and the preparedness of workers to organise themselves. No, the real problem is that the crisis of leadership amongst rank and file workers required a revolutionary socialist answer translated into the aims and objectives of particular struggles.

In the steel strike this meant linking the pay ?ght to the issue of jobs and posing the need for workers' control. The SWP would have none of this. After the steel strike there was a jobs massacre. In the miners? strike it was necessary to consciously ?ght for the generalisation of the struggle and the organised defence of pickets to make them effective. Once again the SWP simply argued for a trade unionist response to a political attack. Faced with mass arrests and physical harassment, workers' defence squads were not only needed, they began to be built by the most militant miners. We argued consistently for them to be built and extended. The SWP instead stressed:
The way to stop arrests like this is to spread mass pickets as far as is possible and stretch the police operation.

At Wapping in 1986 the same refusal by the SWP to advance demands and forms of organisation that could challenge the reformists was evident. Every time the problem is not the ?upturn? or ?downturn? context, it is the SWP?s deliberate refusal to advance a revolutionary solution to the struggle.

The claim that the downturn was also characterised by a lack of interest in left wing politics doesn?t bear a moment?s serious inspection. It merely reveals the economism of the SWP at its worst. In the early 1980s significant numbers of workers did move left. To be sure this movement was not towards the revolutionary left, but towards the Bennite left.

The Bennites were promising the working class that ?never again? would ?their? government act as Callaghan did in the 1970s. Benn was addressing massive meetings of workers all over the country. The movement in support of him became a powerful force inside the Labour Party, to the point of coming within a whisker of defeating Healy for the position of deputy leader in 1981.

This was of course a reformist movement. But it offered a very good opportunity for revolutionaries. The illusions of militant workers in left reformism could be put to a sharp test through a revolutionary intervention into the Bennite movement. A political struggle occupied the attention of thousands of worker militants. The SWP turned their back on it. They elevated their refusal to enter the Labour Party into a principle and effectively abstained from attempting to win workers away from left reformism.

They had de?ned politics narrowly as the politics of the workplace. When the centre of gravity shifted to the Labour Party they had nothing to say. And throughout the 1980s this abstentionism was their hallmark. They were afraid to compromise their ?hard? politics for the simple reason that those politics were abstract and had no relevance to the central political struggle taking place.

Moreover, like all abstract and inoperable ?hard? politics, they were no protection from the effects of opportunism. They were not operable against opportunism. Underlying the SWP?s abstentionism was their fear of losing people to the Bennite movement.

This did not stop them proposing unity with Militant, despite the fact that Militant espouse the peaceful road to socialism via the Labour Party. But then like so much of the SWP?s practice this manoeuvre, devoid of political principle, was merely a means of stemming their losses.

All of these de?ciencies remain in evidence despite the SWP?s new perspective of a new mood in the class struggle. One single example demonstrates this clearly?the Poll Tax. Here we have a generalised attack on the whole working class. It requires a general, political answer. The SWP themselves believe that it holds the possibility of being the means to drive Thatcher from of?ce. Even leaving aside their previous hostility to non-payment?which kept them on the sidelines in the ?rst phase of the campaign?their answers are just as inadequate in this ?new mood? struggle. Nowhere do we ?nd the SWP arguing now for strike action against the tax itself by the working class. Nowhere do we ?nd them advancing the call for a general strike. Nowhere do we ?nd them arguing for workers? defence squads against the bailiffs.

Instead, despite the new situation, we get the same old solutions. All we need to do is wage a militant trade union struggle. The Poll Tax, Socialist Worker informs us, is not really anything different from other economic attacks:

?The government?s assault on our living standards through the Poll Tax, welfare cuts and rent and mortgage rise is no different from the employers? attacks on wages, conditions and jobs.?
This downplays precisely the generalised and political attack represented by the Poll Tax. It is a crude attempt to reduce this attack to the level of a wage dispute with a single boss. Far from enabling us to make the links between workers in struggle over pay, or Poll Tax workers in struggle over pay and conditions, with the mass of non-payers and trade unionists in general, it makes the job much harder.

For if economic demands are met, even though only partially, a sectional struggle will end. If Poll Tax workers on strike are given better pay and conditions they will go back to work and the tax itself will still be in place. The same goes for sectional wages? struggles by other workers.

The SWP are running away from the task of politically arming rank and ?le workers with the weapons?the demands, the action and the organisation, especially delegate based action councils in every area to link the struggles and ?ght the tax on a class wide basis?necessary to defeat the Tories. And this is excused by the SWP by their ravings about Thatcher ruining herself and getting into problems from which she cannot extricate herself from.

The Poll Tax positions of the SWP are merely the latest attempt to turn a political struggle into a bread and butter issue that the SWP feels at home with. But whether we are facing wage struggles, resistance to sackings or the imposition of a hated tax, political struggles do not begin only at the ultimate limit of the bread and butter struggle.

They begin with revolutionaries transforming those struggles?not by slogans alone?by winning leadership on the basis of policies and tactics, encapsulated in revolutionary slogans, which can transform spontaneous action into a conscious political struggle for working class power.

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