

# has the traditional left a future?

Today's conference is to address the question of The Future of the Left – however from the standpoint of our historical project – to replace capitalism – we could well ask the question does the traditional left have a future? This should be seen in the context of tragedy of the historical moment - that at a time when the inadequacy of capitalism is glaringly apparent, there is a lack of confidence in the viability of an alternative society and the absence of a labour movement capable of turning this into reality.

After three decades the labour movement is still working through the consequences of the defeat it suffered during the capitalist counter-offensive, which began around 1975 and continued under Thatcher. Both the ruling class and the working class have amassed in this period a whole new historical experience but it has been organised capital not organised labour which has displayed greater ability to learn, carry out renewal and restructuring to preserve its position.

The labour movement has gone through a transformative process but not to re-orientate to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, instead the labour bureaucracy having been largely successful in ensuring the submission of the movement to forces diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class. During the long retreat the influence of the traditional left has declined, left unity initiatives often no more than the latest efforts at sectarian self-perpetuation, theoretical renewal retarded by the self-imposed parameters which safeguard the hallowed conceptions. The actual lack of influence often goes unnoticed by the many self-appointed repositories of so much revolutionary rust. Some comrades are consoled by a millenarian belief that their weakness is only temporary; the crisis of capital will bring their day. Yet as opposed to the collapse of capitalism it has been large sections of the left that collapsed.

As we stand on the edge of recession it is not so much that the labour movement is at a crossroads, but that an historical phase has run its course.

## Labourism - an historic failure

The roots of the derailment of the modern labour movement can be traced to when the working class initially gained access to Parliament. On achieving this, a division

developed between a “political arm” and an “industrial arm”, it was thought that the “political arm” – which cohered into the Labour Party - would legislate in the interests of labour. Instead it turned out to be the other way round. There was no golden age of a “traditional socialist stance”, as Socialist Appeal and others wish to see the Labour Party to return. The Labour Party was largely the political reflex of trade union leaders, who accepted the ideas of moderate trade unionism, the spirit of conciliation and compromise, translated into middle-class Parliamentary activity. Instead of strengthening the fighting force of organised labour in its struggles, the 'political arm' confined the unions to 'trade disputes'. What was supposed to be the 'political voice of labour', engaged in 'gradual change' was very soon imposing capital's interests.

This was not pre-determined; the direct and constant pressure of the working class struggles on the capitalist system, in turn saw capital respond through the inducement of a section of the working class. But it wasn't only the 'labour lieutenants of capital' for the whole strategy of reformist labour is based on the **self-defeating** ideas of Parliamentary socialism. The belief not only in reforms to improve the conditions of the working class, but that by means of state legislation capitalism can be abolished. The concept of a Parliamentary road to socialism reduces the extra-Parliamentary movement to a subsidiary role.

This elitist strategy is intimately connected to the state-socialist conceptions which have long permeated the labour movement – the erroneous view that equates nationalisation as inherently socialist. A model which in both its Stalinist and social-democratic experiments have been failures as regards creating a new society.

For those who only look for small changes reformism is indeed an effective strategy, but it is self-defeating. One generation of Parliamentary socialism has seen post-war reforms erected only to be dismantled by another generation. In its New Labour phase, it has been more removed from the ideas of socialism than any time in its history making the strategy no more effective. It has never been Parliamentary socialism which controlled capital but capital that controlling Parliamentary socialism for the benefit of itself.

Communists do not advocate abstention from the use of existing democratic channels as a platform for our ideas, but recognise that to create a new society they are neither the means nor the goal. The myth of the Parliamentary road permeates our movement so much that the entire debate on the crisis of working class representation is restricted within the parameters of creating some-form of electoral body – either by reclaiming the existing Labour Party as espoused by comrades of Socialist Appeal and Labour Briefing or creation of a new Labour Party as espoused by the Socialist Party and Alliance for Workers Liberty. **These are false opposites, neither of these**

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options involves learning from the mistakes of the past methods of organising our movement and entirely changed historical context.

The model of reformist labour may have been sustainable during the expansionary phase of capital, when demands within certain limits could be reconciled with, and contained within the system. With the onset of the structural crisis of capital in the mid 1970s the rug was pulled from under labourism, social-democratic reformism steadily realigned itself into the neo-liberal bloc with a corresponding effort to reshape the unions.

If recent history has shown us anything it is that the labour movement cannot continue on the same old way. We need to learn the lessons not only of the limitations of the movement, but also of its goals. Yet there is no escaping the reality that if we really wish to transform society, if we see that as the purpose of our activism, then we require a radical process of re-composition of the entire labour movement into one capable of taking offensive action. It requires far more than a change of personnel, new leaders or a more determined "awkward squad", the entire organisational structures need revolutionising.

In reorganising our labour movement we have to break from failed conception of the past such as building a new body based on the bureaucracy of the labour movement, we need a movement accountable to its rank and file members not politicians and managers. Many of socialists and communists may well agree with this and consider themselves as the instruments of such a transformation without considering it in anyway affects them, but, they consider that it does not affect them in anyway. Nevertheless, we are not separate from this process, **the left and the working class do not exist side by side**. The re-composition of our movement needs to be equally a re-composition of our theory and practice, of our goals.

It is astounding how little discussion there is about an alternative society to capitalism today. We often here the refrain that we ought to concern ourselves with the 'day-to-day-issues', we can't write blueprints. Of course, there is no movement except towards something and without a clear goal of a new society the labour movement will be continually reconciled to the existing society.

After a century of failed, defeated, self-limiting and unfinished revolutions, of counterfeit alternatives, from the totalitarian 'communism' of the ex-USSR to Sweatshop 'communism' of China, to the failure of 'welfare state' capitalism of Social-Democracy - this is a task of re-doubled importance.

***to find out more about our events and our ideas, send an email to [uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com) or leave a message at 07595 245494. Send postal correspondence (letters and articles; publications; donations) to The Commune, 2nd Floor, 145-157 St John Street, London EC1V 4PY.***

## use your loaf!

**Vote for the communist candidates nominated for the LRC committee by the Bakers, Foods and Allied Workers Union.**

**Chris Ford**

I have been a pro-active member of the NC seeking to develop the LRC. I organised a successful rally in the House of Commons in support of the cleaners. As a communist I believe that in response to the current crisis the LRC needs an anti-crisis programme. Furthermore it needs to develop a clearer perspective for the re-composition of the labour movement into one capable not only of defending workers but assisting in bringing about a social transformation, to help create a genuinely free communist society based on workers' self-management and social ownership.

**David Broder**

A Labour Party member since age 14, I have been an active member of the LRC and Socialist Youth network since the outset, particularly the John Leader campaign. I believe that the LRC needs to make strides to embed itself in the trade union grassroots, promoting self-organisation, solidarity and democracy, and therefore the re-composition of our labour movement. This idea of a democratic labour movement is linked to the society we want to see, one based on collective ownership and workers' self management, and I believe that the LRC needs to work to develop its vision of a much-needed alternative to capitalism.

## our forums

**'Uncaptive minds' discussion meetings on 1970s class struggle:**

**Monday 24th November, 6:30pm**

The Grunwick strike.  
Discussion with Pete Firmin from Brent Trades Council, and a new film on the dispute.

**Monday 8th December, 6:30pm**

Where did it all go?  
Lessons from a decade of class struggle.  
Discussion with the BFAWU's general secretary Joe Marino, RMT LUL regional secretary Steve Hedley, Jeremy Corbyn MP and John McDonnell MP

**Held at the Workers' Educational Association, 70 Clifton Street, London EC2, near Old Street and Liverpool Street stations.**