

THE **REBEL** GUIDE TO
MARXISM

Strategies for Liberation



Theme 3: Strategies for Liberation

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Topic 1: Revolution from Below

Introduction

Capitalism creates deeply exploitive and oppressive societies. Because of this, liberation from this system, will take large parts of the working classes acting collectively to overthrow the structures that currently dominate them. The liberation of the working class must come from their own self-activity. This was one of the foundational ideas that Karl Marx developed during the 1840s. Before this, however, he had to deal with the main ideas about social change that were around at the time.

Marx grew up in a society dominated by the power of the church and state. In his student days, he joined a radical group of atheists known as the Young Hegelians (radical followers of the philosopher Hegel). Also inspired by the ideas of Ludwig Feuerbach, the Young Hegelians saw religion as the most important problem in society. Feuerbach argued that by bowing down to Gods that they themselves created, people robbed themselves of their own power and dignity. People were loving, intelligent and creative, but they thought that they got these attributes from God and the church. For the Young Hegelians the route to emancipation was therefore relatively simple. People had to be taught that religion led to false consciousness and control by the church. This way they would come to see the light and move to a more rational and secular society.

Like the rest of the Young Hegelians, Marx completely rejected religion, but he thought it necessary to ask why most people felt the need to create gods and worship them. This was a powerful question that started Marx on the road to materialism. He came to realise that it was not stupidity or manipulation by unscrupulous priests that was the

problem. Rather, it was that people's real material conditions – their poverty and oppression, their exploitation and alienation in real life – made them need the consolation of religion; the fact that they felt powerless in their everyday lives made them willing to bow down to an imaginary God that might protect them in this world and support them in the next.

This is why he called religion 'the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless circumstances – the opium of the people'. And he argued that to free people from the hold of religion it was not enough to preach atheism; it was necessary to transform the real conditions of their lives, to create a society without exploitation and oppression. But how was this to be done and by whom?

Marx rejected the view, common at the time and still around today, that this would be done from above by 'clever' philosophers lecturing people from on high. Instead he thought that people would have to liberate themselves from below and that only in the process of struggling to free themselves would the mass of people also throw off the ideas of the past – 'the muck of ages' as he called it.

Marx also became convinced, by his experiences with communist workers in France and information from his friend Engels in Manchester, that there was a particular social class that would lead this struggle to change the world – the modern working class or proletariat, produced by the Industrial Revolution. This was not just because workers were so exploited and oppressed but because of the power they had as creators of wealth and the source of the bosses' profits. This led Marx to formulate the principle that, 'the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working

class itself.

Revolution from above

Marx's commitment to working class self – emancipation led him to break from the two dominant approaches to radical change around in Europe at the time: Utopian Socialism and Blanquism.

Utopian Socialists such as Saint Simon and Fourier in France and Robert Owen in Britain believed that the way to achieve change was to draw up detailed plans for a better, more humane and more rational society and then persuade 'men of goodwill' i.e. the ruling classes, to accept them. Alternatively they tried to found model communities, like Owen's New Lanark in Scotland which would show the world the way forward. The Utopians had some progressive ideas but their strategy was based entirely on action at the top. They actually opposed trade unions and strikes for better wages, which they said were a waste of time.

The Blanquists, so-called after the Parisian revolutionary Louis August Blanqui, came from the conspiratorial traditions of the French Revolution. They did not believe the ruling class could be persuaded to accept socialism; instead they planned to seize power by means of a coup carried out by a secret society of revolutionaries. As a result of repeated attempts at this, Blanqui spent most of his life in prison.

Marx greatly admired Blanqui for his heroism but rejected his methods as both ineffective and elitist. He insisted it was necessary to participate in all the actual struggles of the working class to organise and help to educate workers to free themselves through mass action from below. This he

began to do through the International Communist League, for which he and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto in 1848, and through the International Working Men's Association in 1864. Rule 1 of the International stated 'The emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class itself'.

These two strategies of socialism from above, by persuasion of the rulers or by an elitist coup, have continued to exist throughout the 20th century and on to today.

Social democracy and Labourism, with its belief in a parliamentary road to socialism and its focus on parliamentary representatives, and Stalinism, along with much academic Marxism and Maoism and Guevarism, all represent variations on the theme of socialism from above, whether it's by a parliamentary government or by the Red Army or a band of heroic guerrillas.

In Ireland the notion of liberation from above by a handful of heroes has played an important role in the history of Republicanism from the Fenians, through the martyrs of 1916, the Provos and the Dissidents of today. It is because, fundamentally, they don't base themselves on the capacity of ordinary people to change society from below that when they give up armed struggle, Sinn Féin, and its predecessors and successors (e.g. De Valera and Fianna Fáil and then Gerry Adams and Mary Lou), revert to 'normal' parliamentary politics and look to go into coalition at the top.

It should not surprise us that ideas of socialism from above have been so prevalent. It is a central part of the education and socialisation of the upper class and the middle class that they are superior in intellect and character to working

class people and that it is their ideas that shape history. It is no less a central part of the education and socialisation of working class people, implanted in childhood and reinforced by their experience at work, that their role in life is to follow orders not to run society. Consequently almost the whole political, media and academic mainstream presents the idea of revolution from below as an absurd fantasy. At the same time most working class people, most of the time, lack confidence in themselves to change things or take over running society; instead they look to ‘well meaning’ politicians to do things for them, whether it is getting them a house or implementing a fairer system.

Nevertheless, there has always been a revolutionary socialist tradition stemming from Marx and Engels and looking to the working class to change society from below. It goes back to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, to Rosa Luxemburg and her Spartacist League and to Trotsky and the earlier years of the Trotskyist movement. In Ireland it was the approach of Larkin and Connolly.

In the short run top-down strategies seem more ‘practical’ and likely to achieve immediate success than ‘waiting’ for ordinary people to ‘wake up’ and do things for themselves. But actually focussing on a mass working class movement is more realistic because the working class, by virtue of its collective power in workplaces and communities and its role in producing profits, has a power possessed by no parliamentary party or guerrilla band or secret army and that includes the power to democratically elect and control its leaders; to combat the resistance of the bosses and their state and to prevent the cooptation of the leaders by the system. This is precisely the strategy adopted by the Socialist Workers Network and People Before Profit.

Our bottom-up strategy

Because workers are forced to resist their rulers under capitalism there will always be struggles that workers are engaged in. In the industrial arena, workers often need to go on strike; in communities, working people often have to fight for resources such as schools and hospitals.

PBP is a grassroots campaigning organisation, designed to take the fight back to the capitalists. This is true in terms of the campaigns that we launch and the workers solidarity that we help to organise. Working people gain understanding and confidence from their own battles and this must be the starting point for the struggle for socialism. PBP focuses on these struggles in the here and now, challenging the effects of capitalism at every turn.

Yet because workers are often deprived of the time and space to work out their ideas fully, they often have a contradictory consciousness – understanding the need to fight for reforms without the need to overthrow the entire system.

This is where the Socialist Workers Network comes in. The SWN is the revolutionary wing of People Before Profit, dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism through socialist revolution. A minority of oppressed and exploited workers will come to the realisation that revolution is necessary through propaganda, but most will not. For that reason the SWN engages with workers where they currently are, so that this self-activity can lead towards radicalisation and revolutionary consciousness.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) How did Marx move criticism of religion beyond the Young Hegelians?
- (2) Discuss how Social Democracy, Labourism and Stalinism all rely on socialism from above.
- (3) What are the material roots of socialism from above? Why is it unlikely to work?
- (4) How do today's struggles for social change improve the understanding and consciousness of working people?
- (5) Why does Marx put his faith in the working class to liberate humanity?

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Topic 2: Why We Need A Revolutionary Party

Introduction

Marx famously wrote that the history of all preceding societies is the history of class struggle. The ruling class has no interest in radical social change, but oppressed and exploited classes most certainly do. For this reason, class struggles are also political struggles that can potentially transform into revolutions. Marx understood that every subordinate class in history needed organisation to win.

The capitalist class, in their long fight against the aristocracy, had to organise. They accumulated economic power within feudal society, but they needed to organise social forces to take over the state. In the English Revolution of 1648, they had Cromwell and the New Model Army. In the French Revolution of 1789 they had the Jacobins.

The situation for the working class is very different. Our side cannot grow its economic power within the capitalist system the way that capitalists grew their power within feudalism. You cannot take over half an office and hope the boss won't notice. We do not own the means of production, the newspapers or the universities. These institutions are controlled by the ruling class. This means that the working class is in even more need of organisation to fight against and overthrow exploitation and oppression. But what kind of organisation?

Marx left some important guidelines for future revolutionaries. He understood that working class consciousness was shaped by very powerful and contradictory forces. In *The German Ideology*, written in 1845, Marx argued that

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the

ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

In other words, working class people are seriously influenced by the media, school, colleges, and churches – all of which spread ideas which defend capitalism. But Marx also maintained that people’s actions and ideas are shaped by their material conditions, by their real experience in work and in their communities. Working class people experience the brutality of exploitation, oppression and exclusion every day of their lives. As a result of these conflicting forces workers generally have, what the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, called contradictory consciousness.

Often, they dislike aspects of the system, especially those they experience directly, but accept the system as a whole. They generally dislike the fact that the ‘rich get richer and the poor get poorer’ but they accept that the bosses must make a profit (which means the rich get richer and the poor get poorer). They can believe, at one and the same time, that ‘it’s one law for the rich and another for the poor’ and that the same law should be respected. They can hate their boss while believing their boss is exceptional. They can resent the ‘posh’ upper classes, but also think that class divisions are inevitable; condemn the greedy bankers but also believe it is human nature to be greedy.

Working-class people can hate ‘them’ (the government, the bosses, the rich etc.) while also accepting a lot of racist, sex-

ist and homophobic ideas – believing we should ‘look after our own first’ or that single parents are causing the housing crisis, or women shouldn’t expect to be paid the same as men.

Marx understood that oppressed workers were susceptible to reactionary ideas. But he also knew that capitalism would continually push workers to fight for their interests and that when workers fight back, they start to see the system that is exploiting them much more clearly. It is much easier for striking workers to see the conflict that underpins the workplace than a docile workforce who take their medicine. People resisting water charges or homelessness start to see how the government, the police and the courts work together. People in struggle begin to see through the bias of the media.

These struggles against capitalism also create a layer of workers, a minority at first, who want to challenge the capitalist system itself – rather than only fighting over immediate issues. Simplifying things a little, we can say that a minority of workers – the socialists – will oppose the system as a whole, another minority will tend to accept capitalism uncritically – these are the scabs and ‘the bosses’ men’ – and most will be somewhere in between, often vacillating between the two poles.

The job of socialists is to try to win over the ones in between. This is better achieved not through abstract lectures, but in the struggle.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx wrote that “Communists [by Communists Marx meant the same as we mean by ‘socialists’ or ‘revolutionaries’ today – not supporters of

Russia] merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes". He went on,

They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement. The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

The Communists, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the workers movement – conquest of political power by the proletariat.

The need to build a revolutionary party

One problem with Marx's understanding of organisation, which has been revealed by history, was that he tended to assume that the growth of the working class and its mass struggles would lead automatically to the development of a mass socialist political party with revolutionary ideas.

Unfortunately, subsequent history shows that organisations and revolutionary consciousness do not build themselves automatically – they must be fought for. Crucially, mass socialist parties did emerge in Europe shortly after Marx's death – these were the Social Democratic Parties of the Socialist or Second International (founded in 1889) – but most of them turned out to be reformist parties rather than revolutionary. These included the British Labour Party and most importantly the huge German Social Democratic Party (SPD) with approaching one million members. Generally, they talked about socialism and the class struggle, but they believed in a parliamentary road to socialism based on winning elections.

Overtime, they became more and more at home within the system and less and less inclined towards radical action from below. Then when the capitalist system plunged into a massive crisis with the outbreak of the 1st World War in 1914 these parties sided with the system – they backed their own governments in the imperialist war. This led to them actually opposing the Russian Revolution and betraying the revolutions that broke out across Europe at the end of the War.

This was a pattern repeated by reformist parties for the next hundred years. Sometimes they would talk left to get votes, but whenever workers really fought back, the reformist leaders sold them out and whenever they got into power they cosied up to the system instead of challenging it. This is what happened with every single one of the eight or so British Labour governments down to Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, with the Irish Labour Party all the way to Eamon Gilmore and Joan Burton, with the French Socialist Party under Mitterrand and Hollande and, of course, with Syriza in Greece.

However, there was one party of the Second International which was very different. This was the Bolshevik Party in

SOCIALIST WORKERS NETWORK

Russia led by Lenin. The Bolsheviks were not an alliance with reformists but a politically independent revolutionary party. They separated from the more moderate reformist wing of Russian socialism ('the Mensheviks') as early as 1903 and became completely independent from them in 1912. In 1914 they broke from the Second International when its parties supported the imperialist 1st World War. And it was this party that was able to lead the Russian working class to power in October 1917.

What distinguished the Bolshevik Party is that it combined a clear commitment to revolutionary socialism and complete independence from the reformist leaders, with active participation in, and leadership of, all day-to-day struggles of the working class against exploitation and oppression.

They agitated in factories to improve workers conditions but at the same time denounced Tsarism and imperialism. They fought for basic democratic demands like freedom of speech and universal suffrage and took part in elections even to undemocratic parliaments, in order to be with the people in struggle. But they also fought against anti-Semitism (which was very strong in Russia) and for the right of all the oppressed nations in the Russian empire to be free. They opposed the War unequivocally, even when it was popular and they were a small minority.

When the Russian Revolution broke out in February 1917, the Bolsheviks were still a small minority, but they had sunk enough roots in the working class to be able to win over the majority as the revolution gained momentum and the struggle intensified. In October 1917, they were able to lead an insurrection to transfer 'all power to the soviets' – that is, to establish workers' power based on workers' councils. But to do that the Bolsheviks had to have been built to a significant

size in the years before the Revolution.

All the experience of attempts at workers' revolution since 1917, such as the German Revolution of 1923, the Spanish Revolution of 1936, May'68 in France and others, have shown that without such an independent revolutionary party the revolution will not win. Instead what happens is reformist parties fill the political vacuum, demobilize the struggle and lead it to defeat.

In Ireland today, it would be silly to try to create a carbon copy of the Bolshevik Party – conditions are too different – but we can apply the same basic principles.

Our strategy is to work as part of People Before Profit to wage all the immediate struggles of the working class and the people – against water charges, for women's rights, for public housing and so on – and to contest elections, while at the same time building the Socialist Workers Network within it as the Marxist and revolutionary pole of the movement – the embryo of the mass revolutionary party of the future that can lead a socialist revolution in Ireland.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) Lenin argued for democratic centralism. What does it mean and is it democratic?
- (2) If SWN is a revolutionary party does that make PBP reformist?
- (3) Is there a contradiction between being revolutionary and standing in parliamentary elections?

- (4) How big does a revolutionary party have to be to lead a revolution?
- (5) When should revolutionaries work with others and when should they remain independent?

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Topic 3: What is Reformism?

Introduction

The only way to achieve liberation from the oppression of capitalism is through revolutionary struggles by the mass of working people. But most of the time the consciousness of most workers is what can be called reformist. They don't like the existing state of affairs but they look only for piecemeal and specific changes rather than the overthrow of the system as a whole.

Generally, they have what Gramsci called 'contradictory consciousness'. This means rejecting, on the basis of their experience, some of the official ideas of the society – for example, that privatisation is a good thing – whilst accepting other ideas such as immigrants being a drain on our society, and going along with the basic institutional framework of society as it is.

It should not surprise us that this reformist consciousness is so widespread among working people. They know from their own lives that they and people like them, their class, are hard done by, put down and treated unfairly, but their whole conditioning through family, school, the church and the media tells them they can't do much about it. Consequently, they look to others – the government, the TDs, the councillors, the union officials – to do it for them.

Sometimes they come together to resist a particular concrete injustice such as the water charges or bus cuts or to fight for a specific change such as repeal of the 8th or a wage increase at work, but even if they would like to see the whole social order changed, they don't usually have the confidence to agitate or fight for that right now.

It is important here to say that Marxists need to understand why working-class people have this reformist consciousness and not dismiss them as ‘stupid’ or ‘brainwashed sheep’ or as ‘bought off’ by the system.

Reformist organisations and leaders

On the basis of this reformist consciousness, however, there have arisen reformist organisations in Ireland and internationally. The most important of these have been the trade unions, which have existed in almost every country, except where they have been forcibly suppressed, and the mass Social Democratic or Labour Parties, which exist in most European and industrialised capitalist countries (the US is an exception).

These trade unions and political parties generally arose in the late 19th and early 20th century following the industrial revolution and the creation of industrial working classes. The German Social Democratic Party and the British Labour Party were two of the most important examples of this historically. The trade unions and reformist parties usually have a strong reciprocal relationship with each other politically, financially (the unions have been the main source of funding for reformist parties) and administratively. Jack O’Connor, the ex-General Secretary of SIPTU and member of the Labour Party National Executive, is a typical example of this crossover.

It is very important that revolutionary socialists make a clear distinction between the mass of reformist workers and these reformist organisations and leaders. The reformist consciousness of most working people is rooted in their lack of confidence in themselves. It is therefore fluid and

can change, especially during mass struggles. In contrast, reformist organisations and their leaders develop institutional ties to the system and a vested material interest in working within it.

As union officials and members of Parliament they earn far more than the people they are supposed to represent and have better working conditions with more job security, better pensions etc. And as they move up the hierarchy, that gap between them and the rank-and-file widens. Out of seven Labour TDs, six are millionaires with Howlin and Burton being multi-millionaires. At the top of the reformist tree, as with Tony Blair, these leaders can become significant players in the national and international ruling class.

Such leaders know how to talk left to rally the troops when they need them – without troops there would be no one to pay their salaries or vote for them and the ruling class would also lose interest in them. But they become very skilled at sounding militant and radical while also calming things down, making sure things don't get out of hand and explaining that 'this is the best deal we can get in the circumstances' or that 'because of the crisis the country is in, we must impose these cuts. These reformist leaders become far more attached to their positions and loyal to the system than they are to the interests of ordinary people.

Right reformists and left reformists

But not all reformist leaders are the same. Throughout the history of the working-class movement there have been both right reformists and left reformists. Right or moderate reformists, like Eamonn Gilmore and Joan Burton or Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, aspire only to very limited

adjustments to capitalism and see themselves as completely part of the political establishment. Every now and again they have to say left sounding things to get working class people to vote for them, but their main pitch is just that they can run the system better, more efficiently and, maybe a bit more humanely, than the right and the conservatives.

Left reformists at least talk of challenging the system and the establishment and they quite often support street demonstrations and even, sometimes, workers' strikes. But they remain reformists in that they reject revolution and still focus on a gradual parliamentary transformation of capitalism into socialism. Thus, although they believe in and welcome the existence of mass movements they still see those movements as subordinate to parliament. Since the Second World War the dominant type of reformism has been right wing or 'moderate' reformism. But in the last few years we have seen a resurgence of left reformism – Jeremy Corbyn, Podemos in Spain and Bernie Sanders in the US are different versions of this.

In the Irish trade union movement, we see a right or moderate reformist current in SIPTU and IMPACT and a more left reformist tendency in UNITE and MANDATE. There is no absolute division between right and left reformists. They often co-exist in the same parties and it is common for reformist career politicians to start on the left and then move rightwards as they move up the scale; Eamon Gilmore, Pat Rabbitt and Rory Quinn, or Neil Kinnock in Britain, are examples. Occasionally there are 'moderate' reformists who move to the left later in life like Tony Benn.

Nevertheless, the distinction between right and left reformism is a real and important one. Left reformists, precisely

because they hold out a vision of a better society, can inspire passionate mass support and often attract vicious hatred on the part of the mainstream media. This happened to Tony Benn in the 1980s (before he was ‘adopted’ as a harmless ‘national treasure’) and is happening to Corbyn now.

Revolutionary socialists therefore generally support left reformists against right reformists and against the conservative right, just as we generally support the left against the right in elections, in the unions and in campaigns. But this does not mean we think left reformists are the solution or can resolve the crisis of capitalism or create a better world for working class people.

Even while they are still in opposition left reformists have serious weaknesses. They compromise too readily with the right and with the bosses. They sometimes collude in demobilising struggle from below and they are characteristically vague about the class nature of the state. They usually accept the idea that the forces of the state (the law, judges, police and so on) either are neutral between the classes or would be if only they behaved better. They also often accept the idea that workers and employers should cooperate in the national interest (even if they tend to blame the lack of cooperation on the bosses rather than the unions.) All these problems come to a head when they form a left government.

Left reformist governments

The prospect of a left reformist government always generates immense enthusiasm on the left and among many working-class people. People hope that, at last, things will really change for the better. Unfortunately, the historical experience is that these hopes are almost always bitterly

disappointed.

This is because the capitalist class and its allies do not sit back and allow a left government to implement its programme, no matter that it has a 'democratic mandate' to do so. Instead they use all their power to systematically block and undermine the government and they have a great deal of power at their disposal.

First off, they, not the left government, own and control the bulk of economic power – the main forces of production and of finance. They can and will use that power to wreck the economy with a view to wrecking any left government that looks for change. They can do this by going on investment strike, by sending their capital abroad, by creating a run on the currency and other forms of economic sabotage. They will be aided in this by international capital and its agencies such as the ECB and the IMF.

Second, the capitalist class and not the left government, control the permanent apparatuses of the state – the senior civil servants, the police, the armed forces and the judiciary. Between them these institutions can create immense difficulties for the government and seriously undermine its authority.

Third, the capitalists own and control, directly or indirectly, almost all the mass media which will be relentlessly hostile to any radical change. To see how virulent such a media campaign will be, just look at how the British media have responded to Corbyn.

Faced with the coordinated onslaught of these forces, left governments have either capitulated and abandoned their

radical programmes (the Syriza scenario) or been crushed (the Popular Front government in Spain in 1936–39 and the Allende Government in Chile) or been reduced to impotence (Venezuela) or some combination of these three.

These negative outcomes reflect the weaknesses of left reformism even before a left government is established i.e. the lack of clarity on the class struggle, the antagonistic interests of the bosses and the workers, and the class nature of the state.

Defeating the obstruction of the capitalists with all their resources cannot be done by normal parliamentary politics. It requires mass mobilization of people power from below – mass strikes, seizure and occupations of work places, formation of popular assemblies as alternative centres of power to the established structures. But these are precisely the actions reformist politics rejects or is very nervous of.

This is why, although revolutionary socialists will support left reformist governments against the right, they also maintain the political independence of the revolutionary party and are prepared to mobilize beyond the limits set by reformist leaders. [There is a separate Educational document on Revolutionaries and Left Governments, that goes further into this].

Reformists and revolutionaries

The difference between reformists and revolutionaries is not that reformists fight for reformist demands and revolutionaries do not. On the contrary, every serious revolutionary – Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Connolly and so on – has always fought for reforms. Sometimes those reforms

are large scale: universal suffrage; the 8-hour day; a national minimum wage; a national health service; a woman's right to chose. Sometimes, they are very small and local: defend our bus service; hands off our tea break; save our local school. But these are all reforms to the system that make life better for working people and revolutionaries fight for all these things in the here and now.

The difference lies in how we fight for them and with what broader perspective. Reformists see each struggle as a means of delivering improvements for the working class from above and within the existing structures of society. They are therefore often happy to limit the level of action from below. In contrast, revolutionaries see every battle for reforms as not only an end in itself best fought by mass mobilization from below but also as part of an ongoing struggle to raise the confidence, organisation and political consciousness of working people, in order to prepare the revolution, which will be an act of self emancipation from below, and to strengthen the revolutionary movement for the future.

How revolutionaries relate to reformists in struggle is further discussed in the Educational on the United Front.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) Historically, the main reformists have been the Labour and Social Democratic Parties. What other kinds of reformist do we encounter?
- (2) Is there a grey area between reformism and revolution?
- (3) How best do we win people from reformism to revolu-

tion?

(4) Why do revolutionaries fight for reforms but oppose reformism?

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Topic 4: The Tactics of the United Front

Introduction

To overthrow capitalism will require a revolution by the working-classes. But revolutions don't begin with the masses first being converted to the idea of revolution and then having an uprising. Revolutions grow out of the struggles of ordinary people for concrete aims.

The Paris Commune began with resistance to the attempt by the government to seize guns from the National Guard that the people thought belonged to them.

The Russian Revolution began with women workers protesting about bread shortages. The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 began with protests against the dictator, Hosni Mubarak.

What turns protest into a revolution is not the issue it starts over, but the involvement of huge masses of people in actions that challenge the state. As Trotsky said, 'The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events'. This is why revolutionaries, in all campaigns, always emphasize mass mobilisation – people power.

Getting the maximum number of people mobilised for any particular demonstration, struggle or campaign always involves working with people who don't fully agree with revolutionaries. To be more precise, it involves working with people who agree with us on the specific issue of the campaign, say, No to Water charges or Repeal the 8th Amendment, but don't necessarily agree with us about socialism or revolution or the role of the police.

Most of the time it involves working with people whose consciousness is 'reformist' and 'contradictory' because most of the time that is where the consciousness of most working class people is at. Being serious means starting where others are and trying to radicalise them in the course of the struggle, not starting where we are and simply waiting for them to come to us.

Bigger numbers help to win the actual 'reform' we are campaigning for, which raises their confidence, increases their sense of their collective power and broadens their political horizons. And by working alongside people with reformist ideas in a common struggle we are more likely to win them to revolution.

In order to work with and mobilise the maximum number of ordinary working people, revolutionaries often work with reformist leaders – TDs, trade union officials, prominent individuals etc. If we are able to say to a group of workers this campaign is officially supported by your union, or to people in a community that it has the backing of several TDs and Councillors, this will help give the campaign credibility and increase participation and this will mean standing on platforms and marching alongside such people.

This is not because we trust these people or think we can win them over, but to involve workers who do support them with the aim of proving in practice that revolutionary ideas and methods are better than reformist ideas, even in the struggle for limited reforms.

United front

This tactic of forming alliances with reformists and others

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to fight for specific aims is known as 'the united front'. It has a long history in the revolutionary movement going back to Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and the Russian Revolution.

The International Working Men's Association, founded by Marx in 1864, was a kind of united front involving Marx and Engels themselves and other revolutionary socialists with British trade union leaders, French Proudhonists (semi-anarchists), Bakuninist anarchists, Mazzinists (Italian nationalists) and others.

In the Russian Revolution in August 1917, the Bolsheviks created an informal united front to defend the Provisional Government, led by the dreadful Kerensky, against the would-be fascist coup of General Kornilov.

In 1921–2, the working-class movement across Europe was divided between Social Democrats (reformists) and Communists (then revolutionaries). After the initial post war revolutionary wave of 1919 had been halted, the capitalists were on the offensive attacking workers wages and conditions. The Communist International, at the vigorous prompting of Lenin and Trotsky proposed to the Social Democrats a united front against the bosses' attacks. The idea was to maximise working class unity and resistance while simultaneously putting pressure on the reformist leaders by exposing them if they refused to fight.

Not surprisingly many new and inexperienced Communists reacted against this idea of a united front with reformists from whom they had recently split, as some of them did against working in trade unions or standing for parliament. In response Lenin wrote his book *Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* and Trotsky argued,

But it is perfectly self-evident that the class life of the proletariat is not suspended during this period preparatory to the revolution. Clashes with industrialists, with the bourgeoisie, with the state power, on the initiative of one side or the other, run their due course.

In these clashes ... the working masses sense the need of unity in action ... Any party which mechanically counterposes itself to this need of the working class for unity in action will unfailingly be condemned in the minds of the workers.

Consequently the question of the united front is not at all, either in point of origin or substance, a question of the reciprocal relations between the Communist parliamentary fraction and that of the Socialists. The problem of the united front ... grows out of the urgent need to secure for the working class the possibility of a united front in the struggle against capitalism.

For those who do not understand this task, the party is only a propaganda society and not an organization for mass action.

Later, in the period 1929–32 the German working class faced the threat of the rapidly growing Nazi Party.

At this time the German Communist Party, on the orders of Stalin, refused to form a united front with the Social Democrats against Hitler. Instead they concentrated their attacks on the reformists (and justified this disastrous policy with extreme ‘left’ rhetoric – saying the social democrats were ‘social fascists’.) As a result, Hitler and the Nazis were

allowed to come to power in 1933 without facing serious resistance. Throughout this period Trotsky, who had been expelled from the Soviet Union by Stalin, warned again and again of the terrible threat posed by the Nazis and urged the formation of a workers united front against fascism. If this had been done it is very possible that Hitler could have been stopped before he ever came to power.

As it was, Trotsky was ignored by both the Stalinists and the Social Democrats. The Nazis were able to divide and conquer, and we all know the terrible consequences.

The catastrophe of Hitler's conquest of power in 1933 is the great negative example of the need for a united front but the underlying principle of working to achieve unity of the working class in action is generally valid and has applied in many different historical situations.

Today the situation in the workers movement is different from in the 1920s or 30s. We don't have mass communist and social democratic parties in the same way, but the use of the united front, in different forms, has been central to the work of revolutionaries in recent years.

In Ireland, Right2Water and the anti-water charges campaign, the Household Charges campaign, the Save our Forests campaign, the Repeal the 8th campaign, the Housing and Homelessness Coalition, Still Waiting and United Against Racism are all examples of the united front in various forms (and there are many others). In other countries there has been, for example, the Stop the War Coalition, the Anti-Nazi League and Stand up to Racism in Britain, Black Lives Matter in the US, and Keerfa (the anti-racist/anti-fascist campaign) in Greece.

One of the problems in France, which has allowed the National Front to grow to its current menacing proportions, has been the absence of an effective anti-fascist united front. Over the last forty years many on the French left have repeatedly found reasons or excuses for putting their differences with each other above building united resistance to the fascists.

Whether or not to form a particular united front at any point in time is a tactical question that depends on concrete circumstances and requires concrete political judgement. It is not always the answer.

But a number of general principles are useful. It is not a question of whether or not we agree with or 'like' or 'trust' the people we are forming a united front with, but whether or not allying with them will raise the level of struggle of the working class.

For example, an alliance with trade union leaders (even union leaders who may let down or sell out their members) is often useful because it is likely to draw trade unionists and other workers into the struggle.

In general we are against alliances with leaders of bourgeois parties (like Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael) because working with them will hold back the workers struggle rather than develop it and they will make restraining the struggle a condition of any support.

Historically, this policy of allying with the capitalists (which was pursued by the international Communist movement in the mid-1930s) was known as the Popular Front. Stalin imposed it on the Communist International because he want-

ed an alliance between the Soviet Union and the Western Capitalist states (especially France and Britain) against Germany. It proved no more effective at stopping fascism than the earlier sectarianism.

In Spain, where the Popular Front was put to the most serious test, the Communists (and the anarchists) made a formal alliance with the Spanish republican bourgeoisie and the effect was to destroy the workers' revolution which broke out in Barcelona in 1936 and undermine the struggle against the fascists allowing Franco to triumph in 1939.

The Popular Front strategy (as opposed to the workers united front) was also applied in France and its effect was to both demobilise the great strike movement of 1936 and to prepare the way for the capitulation to Hitler and the Nazis in 1940.

Lastly, forming a united front does not mean revolutionaries dropping their political ideas or abandoning their criticisms of the reformists, or most importantly, dissolving their independent party organisation.

How to combine working cooperatively with people we agree with on some things but not others while also arguing for our independent political ideas and strategy is an art that revolutionaries have to learn in practice.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) Name two united front's we are currently involved in and explain why we are in them?
- (2) Will the revolution be led by a united front?

(3) Are there people we should refuse to work with in campaigns?

Further reading

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Topic 5: Socialists & Left Government

Introduction

Revolutionary socialists are part of the left – it would therefore seem reasonable that we would want to see a ‘Left Government’. And indeed we do.

But, unfortunately, that is not the end of the matter. First there is the question of what we mean by a ‘left’ government. It could mean 1) any government even slightly to the left of centre, or claiming to be such e.g. an SPD government in Germany, a Socialist Party government in France, PSOE in Spain or traditional Labour in Britain. Or it could mean 2) the radical left government of our dreams based on popular assemblies and workers councils, expropriating capitalists, establishing workers control of production and starting the move towards full socialism. Or 3) it could mean something in between these poles.

The first of these options is very familiar. There have been umpteen such governments round the world and as far as capitalism is concerned they just mean business as usual. Almost all traditional Social Democrat parties have accepted neo-liberalism and support the corporations, support Imperialism, especially US imperialism and its wars, unconditionally endorse the capitalist state (police, judges, courts, generals etc.) and so on. There are times when socialists, through gritted teeth and without illusions, vote for such parties to defeat the right wing parties and the far right and to relate to the working people who still remain loyal to them, but they are not really what is meant by a Left Government and they don’t generate the same hope or expectations among the left or working people. We don’t need to consider them further here.

The second option is our aim but is not immediately on the agenda and would be part of a revolutionary mobilization from below. It is not the focus of this article. What concerns us here is the third, intermediate, option – a Left Government which is really a left reformist government.

This is very much on the agenda in various countries: Syriza in Greece was an example; a Corbyn led Labour Government in Britain would be another, so too might be Melanchon in France, Podemos in the Spanish State, the CUP in Catalonia, the Left Bloc in Portugal along with other formations in Latin America and elsewhere. Ireland is a special case we'll come to shortly.

Such governments say they will reject neoliberalism, austerity, and the worship of the market and promise to rule 'against the capitalist grain'. They will, they say, tax the rich, stop privatisation, reduce inequality, improve public services, oppose war and govern in the interests of working people, 'for the many not the few'. But they also say they can do this within the framework of the capitalist state and without fundamentally challenging capitalist property relations.

Left governments of this kind are not that common – Syriza was really the first in Western Europe in the last fifty years – and the prospect of them usually generates huge excitement on the left and among working people.

Ireland is a bit different in that it has never had even a Labour Government, as opposed to Labour as a junior coalition partner with FF/FG, let alone a Left Government as described above. Given that Irish Labour is so right wing and now so weak, the question of a left government is con-

cretely posed in terms of a Sinn Féin led government in coalition not with FF or FG but with parties and independents of the left. It may be argued that Sinn Féin is not a 'left' party or not 'part of the left'. But this is not how it will be widely seen both by the ruling class and by many in the working class. Because of Ireland's history, a Sinn Féin or Sinn Féin-led government will generally be seen as a major upset to business—as-usual and the establishment will set about undermining it with gusto.

And the question that arises for socialists, and is likely to be put to our representatives, is what do we say about this and what would be our attitude to it should it come into being?

The options

This is not a simple matter. There is considerable experience over the last hundred years that Left Reformist governments are not able to really challenge capitalism and in most cases do not even deliver significant reforms. There is also good reason to believe that the same would be true of a future 'left' government in Ireland. But if, on the basis of this, we simply dismiss the whole idea of a left government as a waste of time and refuse to support it in any way we are likely to seriously alienate the mass of working people who don't have our knowledge of the historical experience and will see us as blocking the formation of a Left Government, probably for our own selfish party reasons.

If on the other hand we uncritically support and endorse such a Left Government, going along with the idea that it will be the solution to the major problems facing working people and the wider society, we will be misleading our supporters and the working class as a whole. We will be en-

couraging the idea that change can be delivered from above and rendering ourselves, as revolutionary socialists, irrelevant.

We are revolutionaries rather than reformists not because we prefer revolution to reform but because we know from experience and theory that the reformist road doesn't work; it doesn't and won't bring about any fundamental change in the system and it is likely not to bring even small improvements for people.

The fundamental problem facing any Left Government is that being elected into office still leaves the State apparatus (ministries, armed forces, police, judiciary etc) and the main forces of production (the main industries and corporations) and the banks and the media either directly in the hands of the capitalist class or run by people with close ties to the capitalists. Collectively these sources of power are far greater than those located in parliament and the ruling class will use this economic, political and ideological power to undermine and defeat any government that it perceives as threatening its vested interests.

It can use its economic power to wreck the economy by going on investment strike and creating a run on the currency or the banks; use its media power to blame the economic crisis on the left government and use its control of the state to intervene to defend order and stability.

This is why the elected left government in Spain in 1936 (the Popular Front government) was met with a fascist coup led by Franco and the Spanish army and why the Allende Popular Front Government of 1970–73 in Chile was eventually crushed by a military coup led by General Pinochet.

In the recent case of Syriza in Greece it was the EU institutions (ECB plus EU Commission plus IMF) that acted as the main enforcers of the will of capital on the Left Government. The fact that Syriza and its leader, Alexis Tsipras, capitulated so abjectly to this pressure should send a warning to everyone on the left about the weakness of left reformist governments. Despite all their talk of ending austerity they ended up imposing it on the Greek people.

Bearing all this in mind the general revolutionary socialist position on Left Governments should be that we support them, through our votes in parliament and defend them against the right and especially against counter-revolutionary or fascist attack, on the streets where necessary, while staying clear of actually joining the Government as a coalition partner or by accepting ministerial posts.

But we should maintain our political independence, criticise their limitations and do not support the Left Government if and when it attacks the interests of working class people (implements cuts, supports imperialist interventions etc). If the working class radicalises and moves against the Government from the left (as happened in Russia in 1917 when the Provisional Government of Kerensky was overthrown by the Bolsheviks) we encourage and support that.

This usually means giving it critical support from the outside against the right. Joining the government would mean some of our leading members becoming ministers and thus assuming responsibility for the government's actions. If such a government started attacking working class people, this could damage us. The idea that the presence of one or two socialist ministers in a reformist government would be able to pull it to the left is an illusion. On the contrary, it is

us who would be pulled to the right.

Ireland Today

In relation to Ireland today we say we want and support a genuine Left Government based on policies that would bring about a fundamental change in the system. Our degree of support is dependent on how they respond to our red line issues. For example (these are only examples, not a complete list, and would be modified to fit the concrete circumstances):

- Tax the rich and the corporations;
- Declare a national housing emergency and start a massive programme of public house building. Combined with rent controls, bans on evictions and compulsory purchase orders of vacant properties;
- Break from all EU restrictions on public spending;
- Massive investment in health. A single tier national health service free to all at the point of delivery;
- Nationalise our natural resources, the banks, telecommunications and essential industries;
- Full separation of Church and State;
- End Direct Provision;
- Defend Irish neutrality. End US military use of Shannon. No to PESCO.

Asked if we would support a Sinn Féin government we would say we are opposed to any coalition with FF/FG but would support them otherwise.

The most likely outcome of the next election or the one after that is that Sinn Féin will join a FF or FG led government. If this happens we should oppose it vigorously from the start. Although it will be dressed up in some leftish sounding rhetoric, it will follow the same pattern of the Labour party in the past.

However in the event of a Sinn Féin government or a Sinn Féin government in coalition with the left we would use our votes in the Dáil in favour of Mary Lou McDonald as Taoiseach. We would say Sinn Féin are promising to create a better more equal Ireland – we should put them to the test.

We will help them form a government but we will reserve the right to oppose them if they go against the interests of working people. A kind of confidence and supply agreement to support once they further the cause of workers and their families.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) Explain the difference between right and left versions of reformism?
- (2) Revolutionaries argue for supporting left governments without actually joining them. Why is this?
- (3) In Ireland PBP argues for a series of red lines. What is the thinking behind this strategy?

(4) Are there dangers in a confidence and supply type arrangement for revolutionaries?

Further reading

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