

REVOLUTION, SOCIAL DEMOCRACY, CLASS AND PARTY.

Introduction.

In a previous CC meeting we saw that the working class is heir to all that is good in the British philosophical tradition, and that the culmination of this tradition is dialectical materialism.

The application of this philosophy to society is Marxism-Leninism, the science of revolution. With the foundation of our Party this application has taken a qualitative leap forwards. But, just as we recognise ourselves heirs to Roger and Francis Bacon, who were not dialectical materialists, so we should also recognise that our Party is heir to a revolutionary tradition within our class which goes back beyond Marx. We accept that dialectical materialism needed the empiricist materialist tradition as a base from which to spring and as an antagonist which it could transcend, a unity of opposites. When we say that Marxism is the product of our class, but that Marx raised this experience to a new level, do we fully recognise the truth of the first part of the statement? At a previous meeting the unique role of Marxism-Leninism was stressed - the working class on its own can make only insurrection; revolution requires revolutionary theory. True, but what about the other side of the picture? What do we mean by the revolutionary origins of our class? What do we mean by social democracy being a cancerous growth within the class? Before Marx, before the Labour Party, there were two lines, revolutionary and reformist, always in competition for worker's allegiance, as far back as our class origins in the 17th century. The historical perspective that follows is to be used as a basis for looking at our present theoretical outlook.

FIRST PHASE.

During the bourgeois revolution of the mid-17th century, the class of artisans and small tradesmen under the name of Levellers put forward democratic demands for manhood suffrage, law reform and religious toleration. In the context of the time these were revolutionary demands which the new ruling class of gentry and merchants couldn't fulfill without giving up their class dictatorship, and so the Levellers were crushed by Cromwell. But Leveller ideas lived on as an underground current, especially among the London skilled trades. In 'Pilgrim's Progress', written by the Bedford tinker, John Bunyan you can see how these artisans and journeymen recognised the struggle between two lines. The open class enemies were obvious to Bunyan - the capitalist landlords Lord Carnal Delight, Lord Luxurious, Sir Having Greedy. But the really dangerous people were the compromisers, the fifth columnists, always ready to divert Christian with their slippery arguments. One of the worst was Mr. By-ends of Fair Speech, the Jack Jones of the C17th, who said "Why, they rush on their journey all weathers; and I am waiting for wind and tide. They are for holding their notions, though all other men are against them; but I am for religion in what, and in so far as, the times and safety will bear it. They are for religion when in rags and contempt, but I am for him when he walks in his golden slippers, in the sunshine, and with applause". Mr. By-ends relations have the suggestive names of Lord

Turn-about, Lord Time-server, Mr. Smooth Man and Mr. Facing-both-ways.

Bunyan's tinkers, weavers and tailors handed on the revolutionary tradition through the Jacobin movement of the 1790s to the new industrial working class born in the Industrial Revolution. They also handed on a tradition of vigilance against reformist 'turn-about's' and social democratic time-servers and smooth-talkers.

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION.

So by the time of the Industrial Revolution, the working class had already a long tradition of struggle. The clearest thinkers among them didn't believe the fight over wages and conditions was the be-all and end-all of their strikes and riots - it couldn't be, because they understood that the interests of employers and workers were antagonistic. They knew that the mill-owners' profits were due to the exploitation of their labour power, but they also saw through the attempt to disarm them from within with bourgeois thinking. John Gast, editor of the Trades Newspaper, wrote in 1825, that "If Messrs. Malthus, M'Culloch, Place and Co. are to be believed, the working classes have only to consider how they can most effectually restrict their numbers, in order to arrive at a complete solution of all their difficulties....Malthus and Co. would reduce the whole matter to a question between mechanics and their sweethearts and wives rather than a question between the employed and their employers." Remember this was written in 1825, 23 years before the Communist Manifesto, and making with equal clarity the same point as the Chinese delegation at the U.N., rejecting class collaboration in ideology rejecting social democratic thinking.

Gast, who headed 'The Committee of the Useful Classes', made up of London Trade Unionists, rejected the idea, put forward by the bourgeois political economists like Bentham and Ricardo, of a 'natural' and self-regulating political economy which would operate to the benefit of the employers and employed alike, if only the workers would stop interfering with the mechanism by combinations and strikes. Gast assumed that the essential antagonism of interest between the two classes would have to be resolved eventually by force. Gast's fellow worker-intellectual at the Mechanics Institute, Thomas Hodgskin, spoke for the skilled tradesmen of London in opposing the capitalist speculators and parasites "who live on profit and interest, and who have no just claim but custom to any share of the national produce." Hodgskin spoke of the war of capital and labour, which would not end until the workers received the full product of their labour. But, Hodgskin writing in 1825, offered no alternative system, no analysis of social and economic laws that would replace capitalism by socialism, no theory of revolution. As a result the most the working class could achieve or hope for was an insurrection. In 1819, at the time of Peterloo, a popular ballad went,

'Off with your fetters; spurn the slavish yoke,
Now, now, or never, can your chain be broke;

Swift then rise and give the fatal stroke.'

But when in 1830 and 1831 the opportunity came for giving the fatal stroke, the urban working class could not rise above unco-ordinated acts of violence, while the agricultural labourers

pursued their own revolt independently. This isn't to discredit what they did, but simply to emphasise the truth of Lenin's statement that "Without a revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement."

Despite their limitations, men like Cast and Hodgskin were putting forward the revolutionary line for their conditions - they saw beyond the workers' immediate interest in defending wages and conditions to the fundamental interest of the working class in overthrowing the capitalist system. Though they didn't produce a science of revolution, they did know what constitutes the essence of a correct revolutionary line - the correct relationship of the particular to the general, of today's battle to the total campaign, tactics to strategy.

It's no surprise that the form social democracy took in the Industrial Revolution period was to try to restrict working class action to mere reform, to simply getting rid of the most glaring evils of the factory system, Combination Acts, repressive laws, which would leave a purified capitalism benefitting both employers and workers. The Radical M.P.s at Westminster who claimed to represent the working class, saw their task as curbing the working class movement into respectable channels. One of them, Major Cartwright, said that Luddism was evil and futile. He opposed "any attempt to excite the poor to invade the property of the rich. It is not by an invasion of such property that the condition of the poor is to be amended, but by EQUAL LAWS." Cartwright said workers should petition parliament, not make insurrections. He toured Luddite areas, trying to persuade the underground trade unionists to give up their secret organisations and illegal activity and instead try to influence Parliament by legal means. Peaceful petitioning, reliance on Parliament, obtaining social justice through reformist legislation, the evil of independent working class action - these are the hall-marks of British social democracy from Cartwright in 1816 to relying on the Labour government to patch up capitalism by priority for the low-paid and deprived areas, social contract and nationalisation by legislation.

After the fiasco of the 1832 Reform Act, the struggle between social democratic and revolutionary lines became more clear cut. In the Chartist movement we have the reformist line of William Lovett, - rely on peaceful petitioning of Parliament, gradual persuasion and education of the ruling class so that they will eventually accept the justice of the workers' demands, and on the other hand, the revolutionary line of Ernest Jones, the friend of Marx, who rejected reliance on constitutional methods and demanded "prepare for revolution". In the event, despite insurrectionary bursts like the Newport Rising when workers attacked the town hall and were shot down by troops, the social democratic line managed to paralyse the movement. The Government, with a much clearer class consciousness, met the petitions with organised violence, while the Chartist leaders, despite Jones' criticism, concentrated on immediate demands, with no overall strategic direction.

On the whole the working class failed to learn the lessons of Chartism's defeat. After 1850 the New Model Unions rectified the organisational defects that had so far made the working class movement open to attack, but on the negative side they restricted

political activity to lobbying Parliament for reforms. As the new strong unions gave workers some success in managing, by struggle, to survive under capitalism, so politically there arose the dominance of the social democratic political line that capitalism can be reformed and socialism won without revolution.

At the same time, at the end of the 19thC, labour history was re-written and revised. The Fabians threw out the Luddites and other illegal activists of the Industrial Revolution as mindless fanatics who hadn't observed the proper channels. The Hammonds described Jeremiah Brandreth, leader of the Pentridge Rising of 1817 as "a half-starved illiterate, ready to put forward any proposal however wild." The new heroes became the compromisers like Bamford, the reformists like Place, and the poor starving masses, powerless under the weight of laissez-faire capitalism until the labour Party came along with social justice through Parliament. The labour Party certainly popularised this falsification, but the strength of social democratic thinking has always resided within the class itself, and this brings us to the nature of the struggle between the two lines in our present situation.

PRESENT STRUGGLE BETWEEN TWO LINES.

Major Cartwright in 1816 saw his job as diverting worker's revolutionary aspirations into safe, constitutional channels. The labour Party was founded to usurp the leadership of the upsurge of working class action in the years before world war One. Today, in the same tradition, social democracy is the cancer within the class aiming to destroy its will and capacity to struggle.

Social democracy can be thought of as the parapsychologists, the mind-benders within the working class. Parapsychology itself is an attack on dialectical materialism by resurrecting idealism in a pseudo-scientific form. Traditional idealist philosophy has been exposed as an obvious tool of ruling class reaction, so it has to be dressed up as plausible and reasonable. In a similar way the blatant attacks on the working class of In Place of Strife, the Industrial Relations Act, and Phases I, II and III have been exposed and defeated. So social democracy is brought into service as a reasonable way of 'getting the country back onto its feet.' Its role is to exploit the contradiction within workers' minds between "never ceasing to struggle but neither being true to their revolutionary origins." The social democratic Uri Gellers aim to bend workers' minds into paralysis. Once the will to struggle has been temporarily broken and the achievements of workers in struggle (in living standards, education, health) have been demolished, the bourgeoisie hopes to impose more formal restraints. But fascism begins as soon as workers have succumbed mentally, not when the first striker is shot.

To some extent we in the Party have assisted this campaign of paralysis, because everytime we fail to do something that has to be done, or fail to do it soon enough, the bourgeoisie wins a victory. Until issue 20, 1975 of the Worker we failed to put the situation in proper perspective. Subjectivism and pessimism were a trend within the Party. The working class was blamed for not living up to our expectations,

The working class was blamed for not living up to our expectations, for failing to act as we saw it must. Of course we were right to tell the class it must face up to its responsibilities. But we were wrong in allowing the class's inadequate response to make us doubt the importance of leadership, when leadership was the one thing which could rectify the situation. Some elements in the Party swung towards capitulationism - to becoming politically paralysed as a reflection of the class's own temporary paralysis. We should have seen much earlier that the ruling class is in strategic retreat, that we must be the therapists to massage away mental paralysis of a working class which has an unprecedented opportunity for aiming decisive blows at the enemy. Is anything like the whole of the Party really aware of the true nature of the present situation? Discussions at Aggregates and other Party forums must make us wonder. What, in fact, is the nature of the present situation?

PRESENT SITUATION.

The present situation resembles that described by Stalin for the mid-1920s - a partial, temporary stabilisation of capitalism, which can only occur because the working class allows it, by keeping to passive defence, temporary paralysis - in other words, only the prevalence of social democratic thinking in the class prevents capitalism bursting at the seams.

In a situation of temporary stabilisation of capitalism Stalin said that it was "incumbent on the Communist Parties to prepare the proletariat for the coming revolution, that the offensive launched by capitalism in a vain effort to consolidate the stabilisation cannot but evoke an answering struggle on the part of the working class and the uniting of its forces against capital, that the Communist Parties must intervene in this intensifying class struggle and turn the attacks of capital into counter-attacks of the proletariat, with a view to establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat; that in order to achieve these aims the Communist Parties must win over the vast masses of the working class which still adhere to reformist trade unions and the Second International." That is a model of incisive Communist leadership and those are the tasks we should be setting ourselves.

Looking at the picture in a different way, it's a feature of all revolutionary situations that the revolutionary class is on the strategic offensive, while acting in a tactically defensive way, while the reactionary class is on a strategic defensive, but tactically on the offensive. Stalin observed that "a peculiar feature of the tactics of the revolution in the period of October 1917 was that the revolution strove to take every, or nearly every step, in its attack in the guise of defence. The refusal to allow troops to be withdrawn from Petrograd was an important step in the revolution's strategic offensive but was carried out under the slogan of protecting Petrograd from possible attack by the outside enemy." It was active defence. "The revolution", Stalin continues, "as it were masked its actions in attack under the cloak of defence in order the more easily to draw the irresolute, vacillating elements into its orbit."

In the same way the Chinese Communist Party found it easier to mobilise the workers and peasants in active defence against Japanese imperialism's occupation. The Albanian revolution was forged in the course of active defence against fascist domination. In the English bourgeois revolution of the 1640s the revolutionary bourgeoisie purported to be merely defending its property and 'liberties' against the increasing powers of the monarchy and its feudal supporters. The reactionary class appeared to be on the offensive, making all kinds of new demands and claims, while in fact these were forced upon it as a defence against a rising class which refused to support a regime that did not serve its interests. The British working class has forced the bourgeoisie now to attack education, health, living standards as a tactical defence against workers' refusal to support a capitalist regime which doesn't represent their interests. Another parallel with the bourgeois revolution is that right up until the execution of Charles I the capitalist class didn't seek consciously to go onto the strategic offensive. They really did imagine that they were merely defending their property rights. But this kind of defensive consciousness is not sufficient for the working class, precisely because it has no property to defend. So the parallel with the 17th century may appear comforting, but in fact it would spell disaster for us. The working class today still largely believes that education cuts are the work of a strong ruling class, that partial defence against unemployment by negotiating over natural wastage is sufficient. Unlike the bourgeoisie which was defending property, or the Russian, or the Chinese or Albanian revolutions which began as national liberation movements defending their land against imperialist occupation and war, we have got to spell out the need for a conscious decision in favour of revolution. This doesn't mean we don't mobilise for defence of Britain against capitalist destruction. But it does mean, that as more and more sections of the class are drawn into active defence around the slogan 'Save Britain' we have to pose the question of what type of society we're saving it for, the question of revolution, because there is no real defence against the destruction of Britain except revolution.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. We are so aware of the strength of social democracy that we forget the equally important, though as yet historically weaker, revolutionary tradition of our class. We ignore that aspect of the contradiction which we should be most active to cultivate. Such historical perspective should make us concentrate on developing the positive aspects of our class while fighting the negative ones.

As the problems confronting us become more complex, there is going to be an increasing need for vigilance against a capitulationist mentality in the Party, because that's the way social democracy will seek to destroy the Party, as it has done every other revolutionary movement of our class. Of course the Party is unique - a completely new development in Britain - but it's not invulnerable, it's bound to be attacked, and the real attack will come from within, not from the Special Branch lobbing bombs through the windows of 155.

Don't say that Brandreth and the Luddites weren't real revolutionaries because they didn't produce a science of revolution. We're talking of lines, of seeds, which it's our job to bring to fulfilment. But the Luddites knew that the real enemy, the 5th column, lay within their own class, within themselves, and if this Party is going to lead the working class to revolution, all of us have got to understand that too, and understand it better than was done in the past.