

Left in a Dark Corner

the crisis in the political Left and what might be done

Solidarity Federation

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For anyone seeking revolutionary alternatives to current capitalist society, these are demanding times. The last twenty years have seen particularly rapid change. The capitalist system is in a state of flux with mass production giving way to a mass service industry. Technological change increasingly affects all aspects of the economy. The certainties of the post-war period, with full employment, ever rising standards of living and workplace organisations capable of inflicting defeats on capitalism, are now distant history.

Many people on the revolutionary left have been simply unable to cope with the changes and carry on as if we are still in the 1950s. Unable to let go of the social democracy that dominated the post war period, they continue to pedal parliamentary politics to the extent of telling us to "vote for Labour without illusions". They see the failing of trade unions as due to lack of democracy - unions are led by corrupt leaders selling out the militant rank & file. If only things were so simple.

Capital technology

Alongside this, the current political and capitalist elite, through their media mouthpieces, constantly portray the changes taking place within society as stemming from new technology. All such change is portrayed as both inevitable and progressive. Those who seek to challenge technological change are castigated as backward-looking reactionaries unable to come to terms with the modern world. The idea seems to be that technology is some sort of independent, all-powerful force, driving itself forward for the benefit of society as a whole. The reality, of course, is that new technology is sponsored and owned by capitalists and is thus in the interests of capitalism. Technology is only developed commercially if it will lead to greater profits. There are two basic options; new products that can be sold, or technology that cuts costs of current production. Either way, profit is the force that drives technological change.

The ideological campaign centred on the idea that new technology is automatically a liberating force for choice and freedom is critical to the successful adoption of new technology by capitalism. At the core of the campaign lies the pre-eminence of the free market. It is apparently only the free market that can produce the technological change that delivers more things and greater individual choice. Of course, here we do not mention the vast majority of the world which the market has completely failed. In Africa alone, 20,000 children die daily from starvation, lack of clean drinking water and various diseases. Malaria not only affects the health of millions, it holds back development. Capitalism chooses to invest more money developing anti-wrinkle cream than on a cure for malaria. This speaks volumes about the true role of technology within capitalism. Fundamentally, let's face it, it is not about real choices or real quality of life.

Should malaria affect the developed world, there would be a vaccine developed – the attempts to date have largely appeared around various western military interventions in malarial zones. When our boys start going down with malaria instead of killing the enemies to our dominance, it's time a cure was found. Even if/when it is, it is doubtful that Africa would/will benefit. Billions have been spent on a cure for Aids. Africa does not benefit from the gains from that research in the form of better treatment simply because Africa cannot afford the price demanded by drug companies.

Left wanting

In the face of technological change and the accompanying ideological onslaught, the socialist movement and wider labour movement have proved powerless. At the core of this failing lies the notion of the state. The post-war socialist movement - both Marxist and otherwise, represented by the Communist Party (CP) and the left of the Labour Party in Britain - held that the state could be utilised by the working class to bring about change. Much of the ideas surrounding state control stemmed from Marxism, which argued that the state under the control of a communist political party could be used as a means to eradicate capitalism and bring about a communist society.

Post-war Europe was dominated by the rise of social democracy, which accepted the need for partial state control as the means of preventing future free market capitalist crises. Social democracy meant that the state should take over the running of certain sectors of the economy, such as education, health, basic services and transport. This led to a blurring of the division between social democracy and parliamentary socialism. Both supported state control, and both shared a belief in the need for political parties in the process of achieving socialism. Hence, both saw the need to gain political power and both supported parliamentary democracy. Even the revolutionary wing of socialism sought full state control as the way to replace capitalism. By the 1950s, the CP was on the long "British Road to Socialism", in which it argued unequivocally that socialism would come about through the Ballot Box. As did Euro-Communism. Meanwhile, the myriad of Trotskyite groups either attempted to infiltrate the Labour Party or argued for voting for Labour come election day. Several stood for elections in their own right.

The increasingly apparent economic weakness of the Soviet Union and the failing of nationalist industries in Europe proved easy targets for the exponents of free market capitalism. When European-style social democracy failed to prevent the return of mass unemployment and rising inflation in the 1970s, as it had promised it would, the post-war cosy parliamentary left bubble began to burst. Capitalism, faced with crisis, did what it always does in such situations, and went on the offensive. Both socialism and social democracy were fingered as the culprits who had presided over the failure of state control. Snatching the initiative, Thatcher and the like championed the free market, both as a movement of freedom and as the best means of ensuring rising standards of living and quality of life. That the free market re-emerged was not a miracle – neither was the collapse of the bankrupted state-dominated social democratic movement. Both were inevitable and sadly predictable. At the heart of the problem was the notion that the state could deliver.

Not-working

Like its political party counterparts, the post-war trade union movement became increasingly dominated by social democratic ideas. Undoubtedly, there persisted throughout a strong workplace presence of people prepared to go beyond the dominant social democratic principles of conflict avoidance and partnership with management and take strike action. However, as disillusionment with socialism grew, this militant faction increasingly allowed itself to be undermined by those trying to secure a bigger slice of the capitalist cake. Pay and conditions became an end in themselves. Belief in socialism as a long-term aim was effectively replaced in most workplaces by a militancy which sought to challenge capitalism without overthrowing it. The deliberate

and false split between economic struggle in unions and political struggle, largely now in statist parties, brought the complete detachment of the unions from any semblance of wider political struggle or longer term revolutionary goals.

A key aim of post-war social democratic capitalism was to ensure full employment through welfare spending and some redistribution of wealth through taxation. Both were designed to ensure adequate levels of demand for capitalism's goods and services, and avoid a repeat of the 1930s depression, where a crisis of under-consumption nearly brought the end to capitalism, as Bolshevism waited in the wings. Through the 1950s and '60s, the cost of welfare capitalism coupled with the strength of a trade union movement empowered by full employment and, demanding an ever-greater share of the capitalist cake, began to eat into capitalist profits.

The remedy was a shift into technological innovation as a means of cutting rising labour costs. However, even this was not easygoing for the capitalist elite, as working class industrial strength often either resisted the introduction of new technology or was still able to take some of the resultant profit gains in new pay deals. Thus, the UK newspaper industry doggedly resisted retooling and fought an inch-by-inch battle to demand a share of productivity gains from new technology as it seeped in.

By the early 1960s, capitalism across the developed world was experiencing falling profits. Growth in both Europe and the US dipped below 3%, from 6% in the early 1950s. As profits fell, US economic dominance began to falter, and it lost its ability to stabilise international capitalism. Investment levels began to fall, which led quickly to rising unemployment and fiscal and monetary crisis.

With inflation rising, the traditional social democratic solution to slump of stimulating demand through higher public spending could only make matters worse. In 1969, the Labour Party discovered that 'tax and spend' no longer offered the solution it once had. The state moved to support capitalism due to a crisis caused by falling profits. In order that profitability could be restored, capitalism and the state launched a joint attack on organised labour with the aim of sharply reducing wages and conditions.

Despite the resultant rising unemployment and cuts in welfare spending, the state/capitalist forces still faced a well-organised labour movement. Thus, the state was forced to work ever harder to reduce the standard of living of the very workers it had promised to work for at the last election. In the UK and the US, where state interventionist policies had always been treated with suspicion and outright hostility by the financial sector based in London and New York, the opportunity was taken to play government and workers off against each other. Management went onto the offensive.

Thus, both social democratic government and the trade union movement were exposed, for different reasons. In the case of the former, it was due to inherent weakness in their economic policies and reliance on the state. For the latter, without any wider political perspective, the unions had no real alternative to a capitalist system intent on policies of class war. The trade union had retreated into the workplace. Outside it, the years of intensive propaganda aimed at undermining the culture of working class solidarity in favour of greed, and the pursuit of manufactured goods had begun to have a long-term effect. A whole generation of people had experienced narrow workplace union organisation with no wider values or aims, while they had been bombarded with a well-orchestrated capitalist culture campaign, with the mass media at its disposal. The result was workers in the immediate workplace willing to demonstrate solidarity, while away from the workplace, and often in relation to other workers, dominant capitalist values

prevailed. A dual vision emerged where workers identified strongly within each other in their own workplace and industry, but were all too ready to accept the media's interpretation of other workers' struggles. No real national, regional or local organisations existed that could organise local solidarity and cross-industry support.

No fit state

Capitalism, spearheaded by Thatcher, was able to expose the divisions and picked off industries one at a time. Trapped in their social democratic view of the world, the unions and the centre-left were unable to organise any real resistance to Thatcherism. The more management advanced, the more they retreated into social democracy, hoping their willingness to accept job losses and wage cuts would convince capitalism of their worth and restore the post-war consensus.

Along with the joint state/capitalist assault on union organisation, the formidable capitalist propaganda machine was again brought to bear. The unions were portrayed as powerful, narrow-minded, self-interested groups of workers, alongside the idea that the only alternative to these people ruining it for the rest of us was fundamental free market change to restore the profitability of British capitalism, under threat from the availability of foreign cheap labour. Those who resisted change in the form of new technology and changing work practices were branded dinosaurs. The future was to be a 'flexible' workforce able to constantly adapt to technological change and conditions. This would bring its rewards to workers and their families in the new age of the service sector.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early '90s only intensified the free market assault. Anything or anybody standing in the way of the free market was branded reactionary and backward. A classic example occurred with the global stock market crash and subsequent slump in the SE Asian economies. These new emerging tiger economies, which had hitherto been portrayed in much of the media as shining examples of the free market, were suddenly branded as bastions of state control and regulation. The only alternative was the free market style US economy. Cue New Labour and the darling Tony Blair.

Faced with the events of the past few decades, the sheer depth of the left crisis is revealed. The problems are deep, and they cross social, economic and political spheres. There is no simple fix. Clinging to old post-war institutions of Labour Party or unions is clearly no solution, since they are now empty shells devoid of any militant working class content or alternative vision. They are part of the problem rather than the solution. There is simply no point in fighting or voting for the Labour Party. Within the trade union movement, the left can shout until it is blue in the face about undemocratic leaders selling out the rank and file. Still, reality beckons; the failure of the unions lies in their social democratic charter, which explains their undemocratic nature, not vice versa.

As for the big idea of state control that underpinned both the revolutionary left and social democratic left, this too has been proved a failure. Yes, it can and should be argued that certain sectors are better in state hands in the short term, while we have to live with a state. At least the National Health Service doesn't prioritise shareholders above patient care – because it doesn't have any. But such an argument is not about changing or overthrowing or replacing capitalism. The big idea of state control transcending capitalism is bankrupt - it died in the ashes of the Soviet

Union and the bureaucratised nationalised industries. In short, the state can no longer provide an alternative to free market capitalism, either now or in the future.

Basic rethink

There has to be a fundamental rethink. And the start of that rethink could do a lot worse than return to the historic and tragic split in the workers' movement between the authoritarian socialist and libertarian wing of the First International. The first was to develop into Marxism, while the latter developed into anarcho-syndicalism. During that split, the libertarians predicted the failing of state control with amazing accuracy. They unfalteringly opposed state control and the formation of political parties. They argued for self-organisation based on direct action. Direct action was seen not just as a tactic, but as a means of building a culture of solidarity that would form the social basis of the struggle to replace capitalism. They recognised that state control would only replace capitalist tyranny with state tyranny, and that the socialist movement had to proceed according to the same democratic principles as the envisaged new society.

The aim of the future society was not just getting rid of 'want' by replacing the capitalist system based on profit with a communal one based on need. This was seen as just the starting point. They did not perceive some final socialist utopia, and so the effective end of human history. Rather, they rightly envisaged a continuous movement for improvement in mutual quality of life. The aim was a free society that was always changing and developing, and within which each and every individual could develop their individual potential in the way that suited them best. Pursuing individual potential automatically means society as a whole is enriched – hence the idea of continuous development of society. The sum total of human knowledge was seen as a crucial 'stock' which the future society would hold collectively and continuously add to for the benefit of the current and future generation.

Any socialist rethink must have at its core an alternative to capitalism. This must be the foundation of a new working class movement. To do otherwise would condemn humanity to a capitalist future. Capitalism cannot be reformed; it must be replaced. We must learn the biggest lesson of 20th Century history; any state, far from ensuring workers' liberty, does just the opposite. Any vision of post-capitalist society must have at its core the idea of human freedom, from which all else flows.

Such all-encompassing vision does not emanate from a single organisation, but from a broad movement of people infused by the anarcho-syndicalist principles of solidarity, self-help, self-organisation and direct democracy. This movement will necessarily be multi-layered and interactive, and profoundly anti-capitalist by its very nature of directly pursuing a post-capitalist society. It will be anti-state and anti-party, since no-one can act on our behalf. It will challenge capitalist oppression in every possible effective way, as it impinges on quality of life and emotional well-being. The short-term aim will be to wrest control from capitalism and build areas of our life based not on the culture of greed and narrow self-interest but on mutual aid and solidarity. The long term aim grows seamlessly from this; organising a culture of resistance to the point that capitalism can be challenged and overthrown confidently, as one of the horrors of human history.

Anti-capitalist culture – or if you like, post-capitalist culture - will not evolve in theoretical abstractions, but directly and practically out of our experiences of fighting against what we do

not like about capitalism. The embryo of this culture is already developing amongst a broad range of people in a broad range of places and situations. People are increasingly turning away from the tired, worn out empty promises of politicians and placing their faith in direct action. Seattle was perhaps a good example of this new mood. However, just as the post-capitalist culture of solidarity cannot be built in abstract theory, neither can it be built purely from action alone. Ideas, principles, and democratic methods of working must emerge within this struggle. It is here that the long history of struggle of anarcho-syndicalism has much to offer the revolutionary movement, as it seeks to overcome its present growing pains.

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