

The Working Class and the Struggle for Socialism

Over the past twenty years or so, many have argued against the traditional Marxist view that the working class is the only consistently revolutionary class, and that it alone could lead the struggle for socialism. In the late sixties, some argued that students had become the revolutionary vanguard, an idea which, from today's perspective, when student activism is at a low ebb, simply seems absurd. A little later, the Red Army Fraction in Germany embarked upon a series of attacks against imperialist targets, not in expectation of creating a situation where the working class would be mobilised, but primarily with the perspective of opening a second front against imperialism by themselves, in support of the first front in the third world. They regarded the working class in Europe as one which had been totally bought off with imperialist superprofits.

In more recent years, the main assault on old ideas about the working class has tended to come from right opportunists and revisionists rather than from the far left. Eric Hobsbawm and his fellow Euro-communists have used the facts of the decline in the numerical strength of the industrial working class, the support of a section of the workers for the Conservatives, the rise of "new" movements such as those of women, gays and lesbians, ecological and anti-nuclear organisations to support arguments against the notion of the working class being the vanguard or even playing the central role in winning social change.

The traditional view has, in Britain, generally been defended most vigorously by Trotskyist groups, who have tended to disregard or belittle changes that really have occurred which influence the overall significance and revolutionary potential of the working class. They tend to glamourise the working class and sweep aside the problems involved in dealing with reactionary trends and ideas within it.

At its foundation, our own organisation had some of these weaknesses. While having a fairly good grasp of the influence of opportunism within the working class, it gravely underestimated the strength of racism among the majority working class. In the more recent past, it has tended to stress all that is negative in the working class, and even ceased to refer to the working class playing the leading role in the struggle for socialism. We have not gone to the extremes of either the rightist or leftist erroneous trends in our stance towards the working class, but our errors were bad enough. The views we held at the League's foundation meant that we concentrated our mass work exclusively on industrial base building. With the changes that were made in our line from the start of the 1980s, much of our existing industrial work was dropped, and what remained came to receive no guidance from the Central Committee and scarcely any encouragement from the organisation as a whole.

The time has come, as a result of the work done over the last three years, and the passage of sufficient time for us to be able to put our past experience into perspective, to look again at the position of the working class and our work with it.

We have often said that the working class of our country is that of an imperialist land, and as such, is profoundly influenced by imperialist ideology-in particular, by racism. The material basis for this is said to be imperialist superprofits, which have been used to buy off the workers. But although this line has been put forward by some on the left for decades, most have not adequately examined what it implies for the relationship of communist work to

the struggles of the working class in Britain, or stated precisely what the "buying off" of the working class actually involves. Has the working class been conceded a larger share of the surplus value which it produces by the capitalist class, which is able to do this thanks to the superprofits which it extracts from the third world? Or does the working class receive the entire fruits of its own labour, and a share of the superprofits from the third world too? The second of these views has been expressed implicitly in the RCL, and occasionally explicitly, although it does seem illogical that a system should be said to run on the basis of external exploitation, while internally it presumably is managed by the ruling class on the basis of offsetting losses and paying people to keep them from hanging about with nothing to do. The fact that people in Britain are, for the most part, better off than people in the third world is frequently taken as sufficient evidence that they exploit the latter, when it doesn't constitute evidence at all, without mechanisms of cause and effect and transfer being established clearly.

If the imperialist system really does involve the entire working class of countries such as Britain not only obtaining the fruits of its own labour but that of other countries' peoples' labour too, then of course, revolutionary work addressed to workers here is pointless: it is one thing to strive for a revolution among people whose interest in one is not pressing, but quite another to try to convince people to oppose, to the slightest degree, a system of which they are beneficiaries.

The working class, in fact, remains an exploited class and an oppressed one, although conditions vary significantly between its different strata. If anyone still wishes to contest this, they must come up with the arguments and the evidence.

The effect of the imperialist superprofits that come to Britain and other imperialist countries is to buoy up the economy as a whole, to influence the relationships between different companies, economic sectors and states themselves, and to increase the flexibility of the bourgeoisie in dealing with working class demands. This means that the working class does do relatively better from its labours than the working classes in the great majority of the third world, and so for the most part feels no necessity to take risks in trying to bring a better society into being. But as an exploited class, it does have an interest in changing the present system, even if this interest is dimly perceived by some and not recognised at all by many. As an oppressed class, it needs to gain power if it is not to have its hopes disappointed and ambitions curtailed.

Changes

There's no doubt that very big changes have happened to and within the working class since the Second World War. The relative decline of British heavy industry and traditional sectors such as ship-building and textiles has long since turned into an absolute decline, with the closure of most of Britain's coal pits, the obliteration of most of the northern English textile industry, the slashing of the rail network, etc. British imperialism has faced tougher competition decade after decade and the problem governments have attempted to tackle for most of the last forty years has been that of how to restructure the economy to achieve greater competitiveness and profitability in a situation where it was forced to rely increasingly upon its domestic resources and had lost the markets it once had. Labour and Conservative governments have both had a fairly limited range of possible policies available to them. They have both had to implement

measures which involved depressing working class incomes, and revolutionising industrial technology. Labour did this, but the Thatcher regime has done it more successfully.

The Conservatives claim that living standards have risen and that real pay has gone up during their term of office. What has actually happened is that, for a large section of the working class, wages and living standards have indeed improved. It is from this section that the Conservatives have been able to win supporters in the working class and thus gain a key element of their regular electoral backing. For a sizeable minority of the working class, things have got worse. The unemployed, pensioners, homeworkers, nurses, and workers in many traditional industries have faced deteriorating conditions. A deep split has been created in the working class.

The division isn't a neat one in terms of attitudes and values. People are influenced by the areas in which they live, as well as by their real living standards: there are undoubtedly more poor workers with conservative social values in the south-east of England than in other areas, while many working class people who have become more prosperous in recent years in other areas remain influenced in their values by the hardship around them.

Revolutionary organisation

The changes that have occurred make the work of communists more difficult. British industry is less and less characterised by masses of workers concentrated in big factories, mines and shipyards (In the past, it was objected in the League that the workers in such large workplaces were not necessarily the poorest or most advanced in their political views. That was perfectly true, but missed the point that, even if the advanced elements were relatively few in most places, they could be contacted more readily in a large and organised workforce). The workforce is more fragmented, and unions increasingly represent a very varied membership—the T&GWU being perhaps the most extreme example. The proportion of white collar to blue collar trade unionists has steadily grown. New industries have modified work patterns: part-time employment has grown while full-time work has stagnated or declined and the proportion of women in the workforce (the paid workforce, that is) is heading for the 50% mark: it has already passed it in Wales. That does pose new challenges for organising activity, even as it opens up new opportunities.

The division in the working class, mentioned above, poses strategic problems for all who claim to stand for any kind of socialist future. For the Labour Party, the main concern is to form the next government. It takes its traditional support among industrial workers (and black people too, for that matter) for granted. It realises that to form a government in the near future, it must recover the support of the more prosperous workers, at least, from the Conservatives, and has shaped its policies accordingly. The Labour left does criticise ~~this~~ the leadership for its "abandonment of socialist principles", but finds itself the prisoner of its own commitment to the party, which inevitably involves constantly giving ground to the leadership. In the end, the Labour Party as a whole ends up tied to working out how to win over a conservative "middle ground" which, at present, can only be done on a conservative basis. It is not only the Thatcher regime which has created the present reactionary political climate, but Labour's effort (with theoretical elaboration by the CPGB) to compete with the Conservatives on their own grounds. That has set the terms in which left debate tends to take place and further isolated those who advocate some variant of revolutionary socialism.

What

What Should the League Do?

The RCL is a revolutionary organisation working in a non-revolutionary, or rather, reactionary, environment. This will not suddenly change in the next few years. Clearly, we do not have to concern ourselves with ideas of challenging for national political power in the near future. At the present time, our main job has to be to preserve a Marxist-Leninist nucleus in Britain, but that can only be achieved if the base of our organisation is expanded and stabilised, and we get a clear long-term sense of where we're headed. We should work on the basis that ultimately, no class has a greater interest in socialism than the working class, and no class has a greater potential for bringing a socialist society into being. Even while we acknowledge the political backwardness of most of the working class; even while we see new social movements in a very positive light and recognise the greater potential in them for gains within the near future, we must accept these basic points. We need to organise in the workplaces, especially the industrial workplaces, with the perspective of long term base building. The general objective should be to secure bases among workers where they labour; to go on to build a broader revolutionary movement around this core; to build links between the revolutionary movement and the alternative movements, with the workers giving a political lead. Our longer term approach should be the opposite of Labour's electoral strategy. Instead of harnessing the more class conscious, militant sectors of the working class to the more conservative elements who have a bigger stake in the present system, we should aim to build a revolutionary working class centre as a magnetic pole of attraction for the rest of the workers and all those elements of society who recognise that capitalism has got to go if they are to achieve material progress and greater ease of mind.

How should we go about this? It will be very difficult. In the past, we had an industrial base building strategy. The basic approach was good, but it suffered from severe flaws. Our lines on racism and on Ireland were wrong; the work in the factories would have been strengthened, rather than weakened, if there had been fields of League activity outside into which supporters could have been mobilised to train them faster; comrades were sent into factories who were unable to fit in, and there were specific dogmatic errors in the implementation of our policies. We could place renewed stress on industrial base building in the future and avoid past errors, but what forces do we now possess with which to do this? Even if every member was willing and able to give up their non-working class jobs and go to try to get work in industry, it would not be possible to achieve the necessary impact in the next few years, given the slow pace of this kind of work. And it is not feasible to switch members everywhere into industrial work, for reasons of age and employment opportunities, not just of commitment.

What we can do is to provide more back-up for comrades who have continued with industrial work over the years, looking for ways in which we can support their activities. We should work for the expansion of industrial work in the future on the basis of aiming to recruit workers who are already involved in working in industry, simply in order to make their livelihood. That should involve generally aiming to orientate our work to the working class. We should look at places where a consistent effort (consistency being vital) can pay off in terms of winning members to the League, whether it's through organising regular meetings in a specific area, getting involved in a tenants' group, or whatever. Any workers recruited should be trained as well as possible in how to organise in a Marxist-Leninist way in their workplaces, and given as much support as possible.

Revitalising Marxism

In my view, there are some things which need to be done immediately for this, or indeed, and other plan of advance to stand any chance of success. The standing of socialism in Britain-probably in most of the world too-is lower than at any time this century. Labour's "socialism" is discredited, but so is that of the Soviet Union and China, who are perceived as taking to the more successful economic and social road of the capitalist West. It will be difficult to win anybody to fight for a system of affairs which is not clearly superior to what exists now, and the working class tends to be particularly practical and down to earth about these things. We need to develop a critique of the different models of socialism, to take on the line being promoted by the CPGB, as well as the lines of other opportunist currents on the path to socialism, and to put forward our own vision of a workable socialist system for this country and of how it can be attained. Without this, we'll be severely restricted in the impact we can achieve, and even more of the supporters who we do have will wonder what the point of our work is anyway.

Ju 20/2/89.

Yeovil Branch discussion-The WC and the struggle for socialism.

This document provoked quite a wide ranging discussion on past base building attempts and the position of the w.c in this country today. Although we had some disagreements with the document we welcomed the realistic attitudes and the general line within it.

The first 4 paras were a good introduction and helpful in putting our present problems in perspective.

Past problems in base building : previous industrial base building suffered from dogmatism in the RCL, and an associated slowness to learn. Cdes suffered economic hardship, and were picked out because of their political activity for redundancy. It is very difficult to work in a factory and tread the thin line between being over political on the one hand and getting sucked into reformism on the other. Similarly for w.c. people generally they are deterred from standing up for their rights by fears of being sacked and blacklisted. These are very real fears and all miners and print workers see the lesson of those activists who were never taken back. A good style of work in factory work includes being a model worker as far as time-keeping, sickness, and quality of work, together with working well with all people, not just the advanced. The confidence of the 60's and 70's in trade union struggles is not there now.

Most certainly the w.c. remains an exploited and an oppressed class in Britain today. The "bourgeoisisation" of the w.c. is a very superficial view. Take home ownership, for example. With the rise in home ownership is a concurrent rise in homeless- and these two groups are often part of the same w.c. families. W.c. home owners suffer dreadfully from money lenders of various sorts, worrying and overworking to try and pay off the mortgage, and knowing their children will have nowhere to live. Even the better paid in the w.c still suffer the terrible alienation of capitalist society. All workers remain very conscious of the "them" and "us" divide. The increase in exploitation brought about by new technology is also very apparent to workers. Agree with para 4 page 2.

Page 3. Sections of the w.c. better off and worse off - cannot make this sort of statement without figures to back it up. And what do you measure ? Wages may rise but with cuts in social services, health care, education etc this may not equal higher standards of living. What is certain is that the division between the rich and the poor has widened.

Revolutionary organisation : yes but don't define the w.c as purely exploited at work- they are exploited in all facets of life - housing, families, healthcare, moneylenders etc. There is an increasing contradiction that the most exploited of the w.c. don't tend to work in the bigger factories...but factories remain a stronghold of basic working class consciousness.

In theory the shift of Labour to the left does isolate rev. socialism, but once you are talking about concrete and practical problems with people it doesn't alter the obvious gap between justice and reality.

Revolutionary situations come about not because the majority wish them to, but because there is no alternative, and the majority cannot continue in the old way. They are then led by a minority.

What should the League do? :DP is convinced that base building in the factory is vital- nowhere else does he find such continuous and all round discussions about all aspects of w.c. oppression, their problems and ideas. However the talk does not often lead to action. JB feels as well as supporting factory cdes it is important to build strong links with groups in the community taking progressive action e.g. Troops Out, solidarity campaigns, CND. These people who "do more than talk" include w.c. people and factory contacts can be drawn out into action in this way Cdes within factories need assistance from outside in times of industrial struggle e.g. leaflets giving background info on the struggle. If there is too much constant support/agitation from outside the factory cde may get harrassed/targetted inside. They need to talk over tactics and strategies within RCL to avoid getting sucked into the system.

Thus we agree with the general line in the document.

Revitalising Marxism : Well said! Strongly agree about having a vision of a workable socialism and how to get their...this is what many people are searching for, and at the moment we do not provide it. Important in this context is properly discussing China and the Soviet Union instead of lumping them together in vaguely formulated sentences. We should not aim to judge them perhaps further than is a particular country playing a progressive or reactionary role in the world? We feel there is probably a strong link between our loosing so many cdes and our inability to provide a clear goal.

The RCL and the Working Class.

Amendment to para 3. Omit "sometimes" in the 2nd line.

The second para is not as well expressed as in the longer document. The fact that some of the w.c. has done comparitively well out of the system does not alter their objective revolutionary potential- they are still oppressed and exploited in many ways.

May 1981.