



The strategy of reformist parties

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The reformist party is bourgeois in its goal and in its strategy. That is, the "combined system of actions" leads not to the seizure of power by the proletariat but to the obstruction of such a seizure, to the maintenance of the class rule of the bourgeoisie.

This goal is, of course, disguised by a commitment to "socialism" but this "socialist goal" is no more than an accumulation of "social" reforms within capitalism. Even an open commitment to "the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange" (as in the now abolished Clause IV of the British Labour Party constitution) neither envisages the expropriation of the expropriators nor transcends the limits of the bourgeois state in its "democratic" form. Such nationalisations do not transcend state capitalist measures.

The programme of Marxism is qualitatively different. It consists of the seizure of state power, the establishment of workers' power through the dictatorship of the proletariat, the expropriation of the capitalist class, the smashing of the bureaucratic military state machinery, and then the transition-on the basis of a planned economy and workers' soviet democracy-to a socialist classless society.

Against this scientific programme Social Democracy, where it has not actually removed any "final goal" from its programme, advocates a utopian-reactionary road of reform to it, within the framework of the bourgeois state. Judged by this criterion it is not a socialist but a liberal party, albeit one of a special type.

Reformism is bourgeois in its tactics. It is systematically opportunist. Lenin described it thus: "Opportunism means sacrificing fundamental interests so as to gain temporary and partial advantages". Engels also described opportunism as: "this chase and struggle for momentary successes in disregard of later consequences." The proletariat's historic goals and interests are sacrificed to a perspective of piecemeal social reform, gained by mobilising pressure on the bourgeois state and, above all, by gaining governmental office (either alone or in coalition with bourgeois parties) by electoral or parliamentary means.

Since such a government functions within the framework of bourgeois economic, judicial-legal and military-police supremacy, such governments are from the outset an instrument of the ruling class against the working class. The bourgeoisie rules through such governments. Labour governments are, therefore, bourgeois governments. Reforms are secondary, determined in their scope by the combativity and pressure of the working class, the ability of the ruling class to grant them or its inability to refuse.

In any case they are limited to those measures which either actually benefit capitalism or at least which do not threaten its strategic interests. Should a reformist government enact, or threaten to enact, measures seriously detrimental to bourgeois property rights or state power, it would be met with resistance or revolt by the bourgeois state apparatus. Varying in severity depending on circumstances, the government would be either "constitutionally" expelled or overthrown by armed force.

In its ideology reformism accepts the limits of the nation state. It identifies itself completely with the "national interest", despite the fact that such supposed all-class interests are, under capitalism, simply a generalised ideological expression of bourgeois interests. It ruptures the essentially international character and interests of the proletariat. Furthermore, in imperialist countries such "nationalism" is "social imperialism". Whilst this may take a more or less pacifist form in time of peace, in time of war this is transformed into virulent social chauvinism (as with its twin,

liberalism).

The reformist right-wing tends to express such chauvinism openly in time of peace and indeed all social democratic governments of imperialist countries act as imperialist governments in office. Albeit under a democratic and pacifist label, social democracy is a purveyor of chauvinist poison to the working class. In the organisational practice of reformism the advanced workers are dissolved into a passive mass membership and electorate and excluded from control of the party by the clique of parliamentarians and trade union bureaucrats.

Trotsky described the structure of social democratic parties as: ". . . the hidden, masked but no less fatal dictatorship—the bourgeois 'friends' of the proletariat, the careerist parliamentarians, the drawing room journalists, the whole parasitic coterie which permitting the ranks of the party to speak "freely" and democratically but tenaciously holds on to the apparatus and in the final analysis does anything it pleases. This kind of "democracy" in the party is nothing but a replica of the bourgeois democratic state . . ."

Trotsky concludes that the purpose of this "fraudulent democracy" is to curb and paralyse the "revolutionary education of the workers, to drown out their voices by the chorus of municipal councillors, parliamentarians etc., who are imbued to the marrow of their bones with egoistic petty-bourgeois and reactionary prejudices." The parliamentary fraction dictates the practical policy of the party in government and opposition. The membership, only episodically involved and then almost exclusively in electoral routinism or occasional "protest" actions, is thereby disadvantaged as against the apparatus of MPs, councillors and full-time officials.

The petit-bourgeoisie and skilled white collar workers provide a base for the reformist bureaucrats. By this means the formal democracy of these parties is rendered empty, allowing the parliamentarians, the party and trade union bureaucracy to dominate the party completely. In addition the rigid separation between the political and economic organisations of the proletariat, sanctioned in the phrases "the two wings" or "two pillars" of the labour movement, helps preserve the hold of parliamentarians and union bureaucrats alike.

Politics are kept to a minimum in the trade unions and within the party any idea of "direct action" or the utilisation of the unions for political ends is anathema. The party is preserved exclusively for electoral activity.

Although reformism's need to relate to, and maintain, its social base is a secondary consideration with regard to its fundamental class nature, it is, nonetheless, precisely this which differentiates this bourgeois party from all others. Unlike other bourgeois parties the reformist party must relate to the inevitable struggles of the working class against capitalism in such a way as to remain the accepted leadership of the working class. Such a party cannot oppose, root and branch, the actions the workers take to defend themselves. More, if they are not to be pushed aside, the reformist leaders must in some measure support and lead those struggles even though they contain within them an anti-capitalist dynamic.

The attempt to "stay ahead of the workers" in such situations and, simultaneously, to limit the damage done to capital's interests, allows revolutionaries to develop tactics designed to exploit and explode the contradiction lodged within reformism. In its most general form the fundamental contradiction is between an objectively revolutionary class which is thrown into motion against capitalism by that system's own laws, its wars and its crises, and an anti-working class, counter-revolutionary party and trade union structure socially based within that class.

A dialectical understanding of the historic development of reformism as a product of the class struggle, but also a brake upon that struggle, allows revolutionaries to grasp how reformism's strength can vary over time, dependent on the rhythm of the class struggle and the motion of capitalist society itself. In periods of capitalist expansion, the possibility exists for relatively serious and long lasting gains being made by workers.

These opportunities are greatest of all for the skilled workers of the major imperialist powers. They are smaller and even negligible for the unskilled of those countries or for workers in colonial or semi-colonial lands. Periods of protracted upswing within capitalism (e.g., 1890s/early 1900s or the 1950s and 1960s) are the natural seedbed of

reformism. The role of the counter-revolutionary bureaucracy in such periods is to negotiate reforms which, while being important for the working class, are rarely more than minor concessions from the point of view of the bourgeoisie and do not challenge the roots of their power in the economy and the state. Nonetheless, struggles necessary to win these concessions serve to expand and strengthen working class organisation even where these are under reformist leadership.

There is, however, no automatic or inevitable triumph of reformism in such periods. Struggle decides the outcome. In all periods, either of upswing or downswing, conscious communist leadership can intervene to modify, utilise, offset and even reverse, "spontaneous" trends. If this is done then even periods of social stability can become periods of preparation, of marshalling the forces, of education and the development of the political consciousness of the vanguard.

In periods of acute capitalist crisis the reformist leaders do not cease to negotiate, only now they negotiate concessions, important and painful ones, from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie. These leaders have to make a greater or lesser pretence of resistance: verbal, parliamentary and even trade union action (strikes) protests (demonstrations). Their aim is not the historic or strategic defeat of the bourgeoisie.

It is to force the bourgeoisie to return to the road of petty concessions or, at least, to moderate their demands on the proletariat to those that the reformist leaders can "sell" to their members. Nevertheless, even such partial or mock mobilisations run the risk of encouraging the masses to go further than the leaders intend.

The reformist leaders themselves are subject to a contradiction; above all they must hold onto their positions as leaders of the masses. Their caste privileges, their salaries, their social importance in bourgeois society are entirely dependent on this.

They have to maintain the organisation of the workers and even mobilise them to some degree. However, if they mobilise the workers too much then they themselves can completely lose control and run the risk of being ground between the onslaught of the bourgeoisie and the upsurge of their own members. These two poles of pressure produce a right wing and a left wing within both trade unions and reformist political parties. The fundamental task of the right wing is to command, to be answerable to the bourgeoisie, to negotiate and co-operate with the state functionaries, to be a loyal and trustworthy executive for capitalism.

The major task of the left wing is to keep contact with the masses, to maintain and revivify illusions amongst them that their needs and aspirations necessitate submission to the reformist bureaucracy and the parliamentarians. Part of this task is to convince the masses that the betrayals and deceptions that these parties bring upon the working class are not inherent in the reformist programme and leadership. All reformist parties in government, where they act as the executive of the bourgeoisie, have a tendency to wear out their "credibility" which, consequently, has to be renewed by a period in opposition, and usually, a change of personnel.

The latter generally occurs by co-opting elements of the "left" or permanent opposition faction into the leadership-once they have severed all links with the masses and always providing they have not committed too many actions in the past that would make them untrustworthy with the secrecy and security of the bourgeois state.

In "peaceful periods" when the mass of the workers expect only limited reforms this cyclical process of governments producing disillusion, and opposition periods breeding new illusions, proceeds with little interruption. In periods of capitalist crisis, however, this procedure can take on a convulsive character.

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