

## THESES ON REFORMISM

(1) Reformism as an organised force, is a current in the working class movement which can be distinguished from revolutionary socialism in a number of basic ways. The most recognised difference is in the belief that socialism can be achieved without destroying the capitalist state and creating a new and different type of democracy based on workers' councils or similar forms. They argue that capitalism can be reformed from within using its own institutions like Parliament. Some have abandoned any idea of socialism as a winnable or desirable goal.

But equally important is that reformism does not envisage the same type of socialism. It does not pose the necessity of working class management of economy and society, the transformation of all social relations (education, health, the family) and so on. Therefore reformism does not see socialism as being built on the self-activity of the working class, on class struggle. In stead it is socialism from above, 'state socialism,' or more accurately state management of a reformed capitalist system. (i)

Historically there have been and are different strands of reformism, from supposedly 'marxist' parties (like Allende's Chilean Socialist Party or the Spanish Socialist Workers Party) to parties like the British Labour Party and the German SPD, now given the label, 'social-democratic.' (ii) But ultimately the preceding points apply to all strands. Because of their refusal to base themselves on class struggle, to take on and destroy the capitalist state, they either become tools of its ruling class (as with the British Labour Government) or are smashed by them (as Allende's Government was). So despite being a part of the working class movement, reformism becomes a blockage to the further development of that movement and sooner or later its enemy.

(2) Nevertheless differences within reformism are important, especially when considering its British variants. Britain in fact, lacks a reformist party in the genuine sense of a party actually trying to change capitalism. Alongside other parties of mainstream social democracy in Europe and elsewhere, they have become simply managerial in their approach to the system: desiring only to run it more efficiently and caringly through state intervention. While the Labour Party has never been a socialist party like its continental counterparts, it has now dropped the pre-war rhetoric and formal commitment to socialism. The limits of that vision of socialism ended with the reforms of the 1945-50 era, of state services and basic nationalisation etc. The 'revisionist' theories of Crosland and the like, justifying this shift (iii) have been practically consolidated in the leaderships of Gaitskell, Wilson and Callaghan. Given this growth of managerial social-democracy, traditional reformism is represented in Britain by the Labour Left.

(3) There has also been however, been a partial convergence of the degenerated parties of the old 3rd International (iv) Communist Parties with traditional reformism. This is primarily due to their position that it is possible to modify capitalism from within through parliamentary roads to socialism and their consequent reliance on alliances with reformist left politicians and union leaders, instead of independent working class organisation and action. Despite their progressive break with Stalinism, the new 'Euro-Communist' currents remain within this reformist perspective. Communist Parties remain distinguishable from other types of reformism by their formal marxism, relations with the working class and links to the Soviet Union.

(4) Revolutionaries must develop tactics to deal with all types of reformism, because those currents now dominate working class movements throughout the capitalist world, with revolutionary marxism a small, if growing minority. A revolution, with a working class consciously fighting for socialist goals could not possibly be achieved without challenging the hold of reformism. That domination cannot be challenged by avoiding reformist institutions (trade unions, Labour Party, Trades Councils etc). Neither they nor reformist ideas can be ignored by counterposing notions of a pure, revolutionary working class struggle and abstract "autonomous self-activity."

(5) The traditional tactic for dealing with reformism - the united front - was developed by the early 3rd International. Revolutionaries would engage with social democrats in common limited objectives in an effort to show the limits to what reformism could achieve and in the process win workers away from it. While this remains a necessary starting point, both its misuse (eg by some Trotskyists as a purely "exposure" device) and the changing conditions of class struggle, would entail us going beyond it. We have to give specific form and content to any united front tactic - at day to day or governmental level- that arises from the actual relations between reformism, class struggle and the working class today. So for instance attempts to involve reformists in united action today have to acknowledge the decay of many Labour Party local organisations and the need to prioritise the unions as a framework for such actions.

(6) In Britain there has been 3 major interpretations of how to deal with reformism - the Communist Party, orthodox Trotskyism and the 'IS Tradition' - each having major inadequacies.

(7) The CP poses the key question of reformism as a division between the left and right, in Labour Party and unions. They then try to advance struggle by constructing alliances such as the "Broad Left" in various trade unions. What this ignores is the common structural constraints on Labour and union leaders of right and left that arise from them operating within and/or accepting the capitalist system. Therefore by strategically relying on people like Scanlon, Jones, Foot and Benn, they not only re-inforce illusions and underplay independent working class action; they end up with a reformist practice.

(8) Orthodox Trotskyism is dominated by an 'institutional' analysis that locates the problem of reformism as the relationship between the working class and the Labour Party, and to a lesser extent other Labourist institutions. This depends on variations of the formula that the Labour Party is "the mass party of the working class," because of the links to the unions and the voting support the majority of the working class gives to Labour. This falsely collapses the working class into the unions. It mistakes a defensive class vote against the Tories for massive illusions in the politics of Labour and its ability to advance working class interests. These 'illusions' seldom exist outside layers of militants at the base of social democracy.

What this misconception leads to is firstly varieties of 'entrism'. In its extreme form in the practice of the Militant Group whose activity is totally Labour Party orientated; in modified form in perennial Trotskyist "raiding parties" entering for specific periods to win over militants inside. (v) In all forms, they over-estimate the degree to which struggles arise in and work through the Labour Party.

Secondly, the effect is a reliance on 'exposure' politics that takes the necessary process of putting specific demands on Labour to a sterile mystification of the ability of Labour to carry out such demands or in the power of the Left to force them to do so. Examples are in such slogans as "Labour Break with class collaboration," "Labour to power on a socialist programme," "Left (Labour) take control." With such tactics they mistakenly believe that they are addressing the mass of the working class with demands that relate to their needs and consciousness. The main positive aspect of the orthodox Trotskyist analysis that because it sees the importance of the institutions of social democracy, it has correctly been less quick to write them off as dead as many on the Left have done in Britain and other places like Portugal.

(9) The 'IS tradition' confronted some of the problems of the institutional analysis with its emphasis on the "shifting locus of reforms," linked to changes in Capital and the integration of the unions into the state. The notion of a "home-made" reformism successfully focussed on aspects of the changing relationships between the Labour Party/movement and the working class, emphasising rank and file organising and the shop stewards movement. In so far as this broke with the equation reformism=social democracy and stressed independent working class activity it was healthy and Big Flame has

similar analyses. However we also tended to share its weaknesses. First its economism. The idea that when economic expansion finished, the power of reformism diminished because it could no longer 'deliver the goods.' This vastly under-estimated the ideological power of reformism, which can actually be strengthened in crisis periods. Secondly, it under-estimated the institutional level and over-stated the decline of labour. This led to a failure to develop adequate tactics, instead depending on the "vacuum of power" theory which asserted that reformism dominated mainly because of the lack of size of the revolutionary alternative. This still leads the S.P today to inflate the possibilities of themselves appearing as an alternative to labour.

(IO) Existing interpretations of reformism miss the crucial element, which is that it is re-produced in everyday life. The continuity of capitalism re-produces the belief in the possibility and desirability of reforms, because these are the most obvious ways people have of struggling to advance or defend their interests. The Labour Party is a political expression of this and is a genuine reason why many people join. This is not to say that all struggles and demands within the system are reformist, or that the "working class is reformist". A struggle is reformist or not by the perspectives and methods through which it is fought and this applies from wage struggles to community actions. Precisely because reformism is a living relationship with daily struggles, it co-exists with and can be challenged by revolutionary alternatives.

Without the understanding of the depth of reformism in peoples' struggles and consciousness, both "institutional" and "home-made" reformism analyses consistently exaggerate the immediate possibilities of mass struggle. This was a consistent mistake of virtually all tendencies on the left, including Big Flame, under the period of the Labour Government. Many tendencies therefore are left with no effective analysis of why such struggles do not take place. They then turn to "substitute" explanations, such as the IMG emphasis on blaming the "prop" of the Labour/union bureaucracy for holding back struggles, without any explanation of why the working class did not usually challenge this. Because of this analysis, ways are not advanced in which the limits of existing struggles can be challenged and the potential of working class struggle for going beyond reformism can be developed.

(II) It follows therefore that reformism is a multi-levelled phenomenon that include ideological, institutional and economic aspects. It is 'interior' to working class struggle, not simply an 'external' and inserted element. This also highlights the weakness of Lenin's analysis that saw reformism as stemming from the existence of a privileged "labour aristocracy." Tactics must deal with all these aspects. Big Flame would emphasise the need to prioritise the challenge to reformism on the terrain of day-to-day struggles at national and local level. The hold of reformism cannot be effectively challenged until socialist alternatives are posed dealing with the politics of those struggles. Examples of such challenges already beginning to emerge are workers' plans, socialist perspectives for health, education and other services and so on. They emphasise that reformism is not just the belief in the neutrality of the state, but of all other capitalist institutions. By being forced solely onto a defensive terrain ("defend the unions," "defend the NHS" etc), the revolutionary left too often finds itself competing with reformism primarily on grounds of greater militancy.

(I2) Tactics which deal specifically with the Labour Party/movement institutions are still necessary, because such struggles interact with those institutions. We have to begin with a characterisation of the Labour Party. We believe that the Labour Party is a bourgeois party (defined by programme and leadership) resting on a working class base. This duality was recognised by Lenin in the early 1920's and informed the tactics of the British Communist Party, for instance for affiliation to Labour. But while the characterisation remains the same, the tactics must differ. The two basic conditions which determined the affiliation tactic - that the Labour Party was a positive step in existing working class consciousness and that the masses had no experience of

Labour in government - have been historically surpassed. The working class has experienced a number of Labour Government's pursuing pro-capitalist policies, thus reducing positive identification as "our party." And Labour has gone into organisational decay in relation to its working class base, losing much of its individual membership.

(13) The Labour Party nevertheless retains its links with working class struggle through the unions, other labour movement institutions and through its position as the parliamentary expression of the existing movement. The labour movement link is vital because it involves thousands of the most class-conscious militants at the base of social democracy, who revolutionaries must work with and win over, despite and because of their attachment to Labour and left-reformism. The parliamentary expression is important because it reflects the nature of working class political representation under normal conditions of bourgeois democracy. Embryonic forms of direct democracy, built on working class power (strike committees, tenants' action groups etc) will develop in struggle and are a priority for revolutionary socialists. But it is inevitable that without some form of dual power and a widespread proletarian alternative, the form of political representation that the mass of the working class will regard as primary, will be parliamentary. This is true regardless of the degree of cynicism or consciousness of the limits of parliamentarianism that exist in the working class. Because the alternatives appear to be either the Tory class enemy, totalitarian Eastern European-style "socialism," or too embryonic.

(14) These realities condition why revolutionaries should call for a Labour vote (or in other European circumstances, for Communist/socialist parties). This is done without in any way supporting the programme or policies of the Labour Party, in or out of government. Our call for a Labour vote is on the basis of class against class, recognising that the mass of the working class vote Labour as a way of affirming their class identity and that the alternative is the Tories, who will launch direct assaults on working class gains and organisation. But while the Tories are worse than Labour, we refuse to call Labour a "lesser evil," because this is the basis by which Labour re-produces its support among working people. Only by making clear the "different evil" of Labour can that connection begin to be broken. We also recognise that Labour in opposition gives them space for phoney radicalisation that disarms militants and makes it more difficult to build a stronger socialist opposition that has broken with labourism.

(15) Revolutionaries should however, support electoral alternatives that are a genuine socialist challenge to Labour and reformism; we use elections as a means to put forward a programme of demands that arise out of class struggle, to build the campaigns associated with them and to advance general propaganda for socialism. The growing presence of the Far Left in elections throughout Europe, is a reflection that this is a useful and necessary way of presenting a generalised socialist alternative to reformism. Big Flame will build on the experience of Socialist Unity, positive and negative, to investigate the possibilities of future electoral interventions involving the widest possible forces prepared to pit a socialist alternative to Labour, at a local and national level.

(16) The experience of the past decade has shown the immense importance of parliamentary institutions in effecting class struggle; for instance the de-mobilising effect elections had in France 1968 and Italy 1976. But more than this, recent experiences in Portugal, Spain and elsewhere, show that working class attachment to institutions of bourgeois democracy is strong. These are not mere "illusions," They reflect the fact that such institutions are a gain historically, especially given peoples' experience of fascism and the de-generation of the Russian revolution. The masses will only break with representative forms when alternative proletarian democracy is deeply rooted, generalised throughout the whole society and seen to be more democratic. It is necessary for socialists to defend and even extend elements of bourgeois democracy against the erosion of democratic rights, that is a feature of many modern capitalist states. (vi)

But we deny that changes concerning bourgeois democracy require a new revolutionary strategy. Those who argue that there is a '3rd Road' between revolution and reform, prioritise working through institutions of bourgeois democracy and downgrade the self-activity of the working class. Although the exact relationship to representative democratic forms cannot be predicted in advance of revolutionary situations, we affirm the possibility of proletarian, direct democracy; both as more democratic and as the political alternative to the maintenance of capitalist class rule through parliamentary systems.

(17) We believe that a Left Government (vii) can advance the possibilities of achieving socialism. This is not because it will legislate socialism into being. But because its existence will help create space for autonomous working class struggle, providing a material base for the working class to move to more advanced political objectives. The role of revolutionaries is to build popular forms of working class power, to constitute a revolutionary pole, arming the working class politically and militarily for the necessity to take power independently. We would however defend the Left Government if specific pro-working class actions were attacked by the ruling class. In general we would use the contradictions that will exist inside the forces of the Left Government to engage in common struggle and win over sections of the base of militants supporting the reformist project.

We must be opposed to any tactics in relation to the Left Government or the possibility of one (as in France recently), that confuse the nature of such a political force. For instance it is wrong to pose demands which pretend that reformists can be revolutionaries, so as to "expose" them or for any other reason, as the French section of the Fourth International did in the 1978 elections. (viii) We should not designate such forces (as the CP/SP in France) as "workers' governments," as this confuses militants. A Left Government is only useful in strengthening the struggle of the working class, to the extent that the class and its vanguard sectors in particular, have no illusions in that Government.

(18) In this context we would regard the growth of the Left within Labour and moves to democratise the Labour Party as a step forward. It makes Labour more responsive to class struggles and enables us to engage reformist militants in more advanced political objectives. But we also believe that no matter how democratic and radical reformism is, it will remain trapped within the confines of constitutionalism and unable to lead mass struggles in an anti-capitalist direction. It is not possible to transform the Labour Party into a revolutionary socialist party and we are opposed to entry into it on that basis. While we recognise that working in the Labour Party appears to be a viable political option to many people, we do not think it that working in it is the most useful way of building class struggle. We are not completely opposed in principle to work inside the Labour Party, but in terms of existing political conditions, we think it is wrong. Therefore members of Big Flame do not join the Labour Party, except in exceptional circumstances (x).

(19) While the question of demands on Labour and how far forces within it can be pushed, is a problematical area; we do not think it useful for the Far Left that is outside Labour, to elaborate demands and programmes for within it, (programmes of democratisation, "sack Callaghan" etc). This is not simply because we are outside, but because they can create illusions in the forces surrounding people like Benn and also make little impact given the existing balance of forces between reformism and the Far Left. Our priority and the best way of pushing Labour to the Left is to build independent working class action and organisation. This will drag Labour into the struggles and not push the struggles into the stifling embrace of Labour and constitutionalism. This is different from putting specific demands on Labour Government or Councils that arise from class struggles (eg to nationalise a firm threatening redundancies or to stop cuts). This remains a necessary political tactic.

(20) The best way to engage the base of social democracy in political dialogue is through united action on basic issues like racism, abortion and wage controls. It is also the most effective way of winning those struggles. This united front at the base requires us to prioritise work inside union branches, Trades Councils and other labour movement institutions, as well as our more traditional work inside independent structures like Anti-racist committees, UTOM, anti-cuts bodies and so on.

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The signatories to these theses are putting them forward for consideration and ultimately voting on at the 1979 BF Conference. This is because we believe that a coherent and general position on reformism will aid us in our political work and is better than having disconnected positions on voting Labour, putting demands on Labour and so on. We do not claim that these theses are enough to guide a political practice in today's conditions of struggle. They have to be supplemented by tactics flowing from a concrete analysis of the period under a Tory government and peoples' experiences at a local and sectoral level. But we think they can clarify the general debate. Although long, we think there is adequate time for comrades to discuss them and vote at Conference. Finally individual signatories may not agree with every single formulation, but take overall political responsibility for the general political position.

#### NOTES TO THESES

- (i) State Socialism is a term that has grown in use recently to describe either reformist strategies or Russian-style 'socialism.' While we do not regard either as authentic socialism, the term has the advantage of showing the common dependence on the state, rather than popular working class power.
- (ii) This has to be distinguished from the use of 'social-democracy' in the period around the Russian revolution, when revolutionary marxist parties were often called social-democratic. This for instance applied to the German SPD, which has now dropped any reference to being a socialist party.
- (iii) A number of theoretical works came out attempting to "revise" Labour's formal commitment to socialism and working class politics. The most prominent was Grosland's "The Future of Socialism."
- (iv) The 3rd International grouped Communist Parties, following the Bolshevik model. It de-generated and died under Stalin. It is also worth pointing out that this (correct) use of the term united front, differs from how many people use it today simply to refer to joint work among revolutionaries.
- (v) Entrism has come to be a confusing term used to mean anyone entering the Labour Party for any political purpose. Classically however it meant groups going in to do political work, win people over and come out again (or be thrown out) in periods when it was judged that independent revolutionary organisation was not possible. Those who genuinely believe Labour can be transformed into a revolutionary party or just accept its existing nature are of course not entrists.
- (vi) An example of extension of bourgeois rights in Briatin could be proportional representation.
- (vii) This does not mean a government of managerial social democracy or a revolutionary government.
- (viii) They said: "The CP-SP without waiting for 1978, must declare they are ready to form a gov't, not to manage the bourgeois state within the framework of the market economy, as the Common Programme lays down, but to get rid of Giscard, satisfy the workers' demands and take measures opening the way to workers' power."
- (ix) Such exceptional circumstances could include, being in an area where there was no-one else on the left, or someone with a substantial base inside the LP leaving to join BF. It must be stressed though, that these are collective decisions, not individual ones and are of a temporary nature.